Record Store Day: Vinyl drops from Bowie, Blur, Prodigy & tons more

BUYING GUIDE 100+ essential components p109

Darling buds: Astell&Kern's AK Zero1 wired in-ear monitors

Hi-Fi Choice

PASSION FOR SOUND

Issue No. **487**

April 2022

GOOD HEALTH!

Beats Fit Pro brings your sounds to the gym

MUSIC STREAMING SERVICE GUIDE

GROUP TEST

Best price plan, biggest library and who delivers bit-perfect hi-res

+ NEWS EXTRA:

Launches from JBL, Melco, Klipsch, Lenco, Audio-Technica, Vertere and more...

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Dethonray's Prelude DTR1+ Digital Audio Player

"Smooth, simple & smart..."

Roksan introduces its Attessa integrated amp

RAISING THE BAR

The Sonos Beam Gen 2 Dolby Atmos soundbar – made for music!

"COMPLETE HI-FI IN A BOX!"

Bargain! Rega's stunning System One – just £1,200!

A SUPREME TALENT

We celebrate the genius of sax god John Coltrane

"CHAMPION LP SPINNER"

Pro-Ject's Debut PRO – the ultimate starter turntable?

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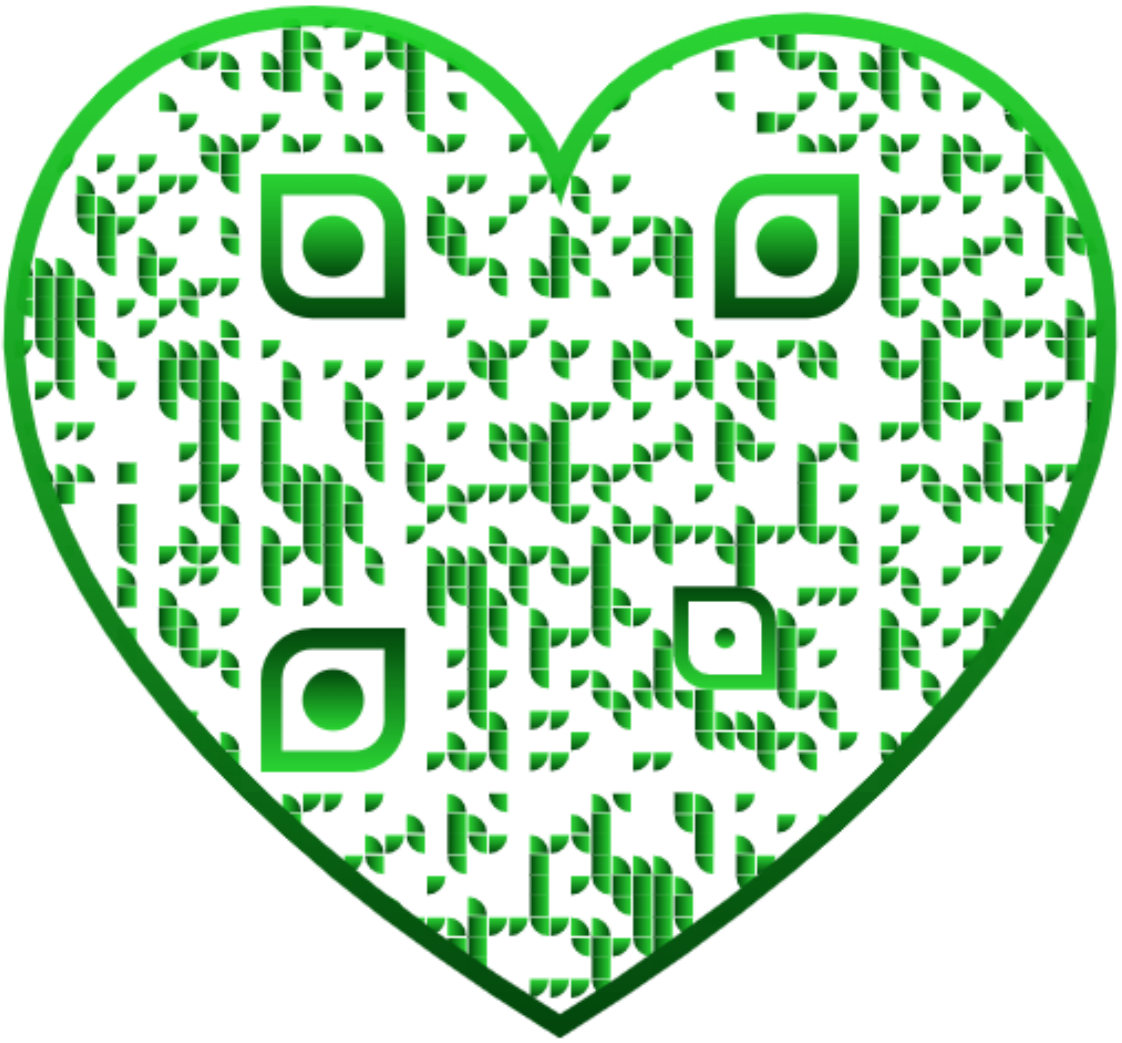

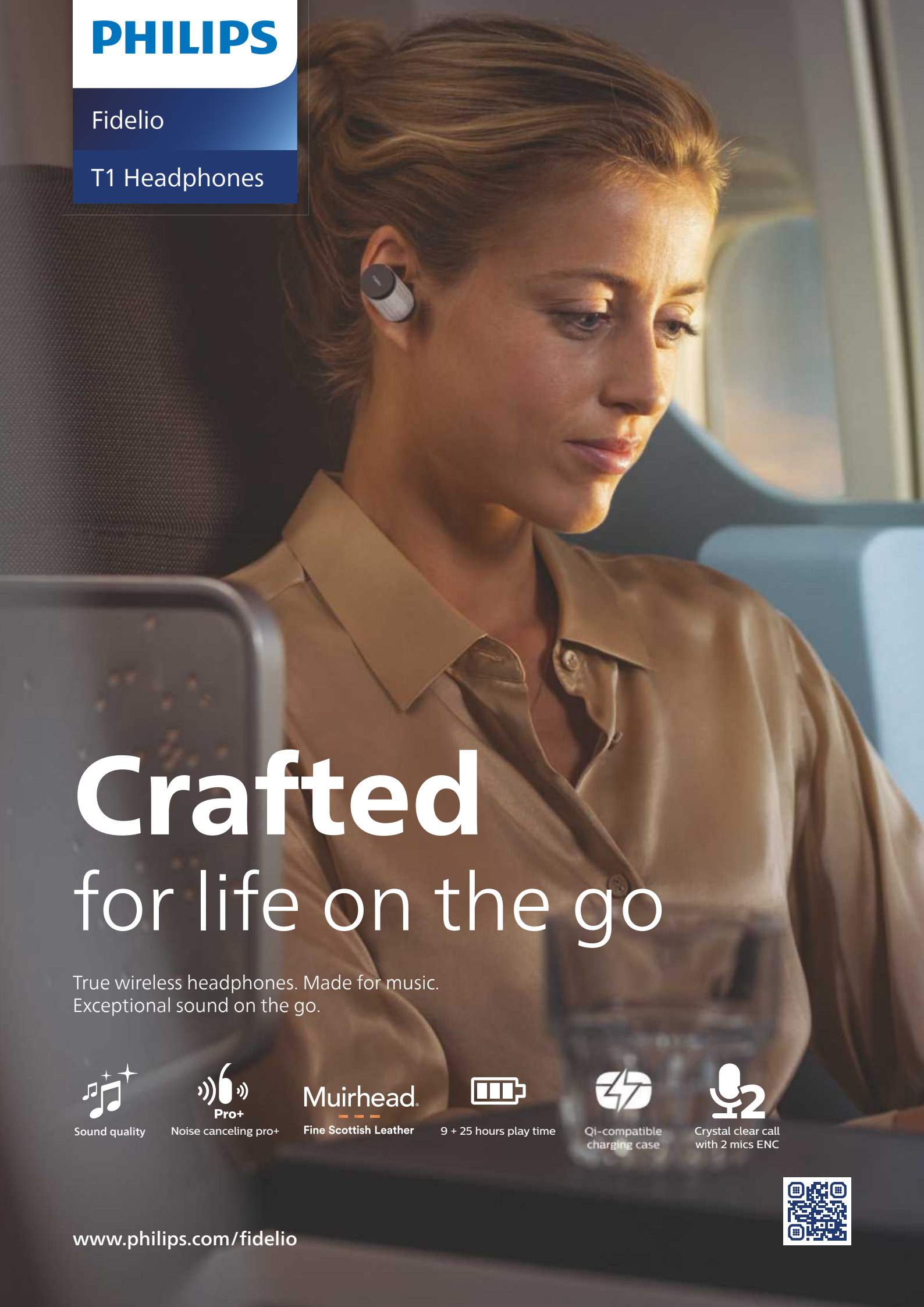
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Welcome

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BADGES EXPLAINED

OUR AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE: Awarded to those products that are judged to deliver outstanding performance

RECOMMENDED: Products that we feel meet a high standard of performance

GROUP TEST WINNER: Comparative tests can only have one winner, and this badge says it all!

Picture credit: David James Swanson

Anyone remember *Money's Too Tight (To Mention)*, the US recession groover released by The Valentine Brothers in 1982 and hammed up three years later by Simply Red?

Well, it strikes me that *MTT(TM)* is the most appropriate anthem for 2022. I'm sure you've come to dread the rattle of the letter box as the post arrives as much as I have. In the past five days I've been informed by my electric, gas and oil providers that payments are increasing for providing the same service they were last year. And let's not even talk about filling up the car.

So, considering *MTT(TM)*'s an unfortunate fact, we are doubling down on our efforts to seek out the very best kit to suit what's left in your pocket. Our Value For Money ratings have always been an integral part of our selection process when it comes to deciding which products to cover and we're determined to be even more stringent from now on in making sure we bring you the best at the most competitive prices.

This month's *Group Test* gets to grips with music streaming services so you can navigate to the payment package most suited to your needs and there's also an exuberant review of the Rega System One which, as it says on the cover, is a classy complete hi-fi in a box for just north of a grand.

Plenty more bargains inside too. Enjoy!

Steve Sutherland Editor

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Hi-Fi Choice

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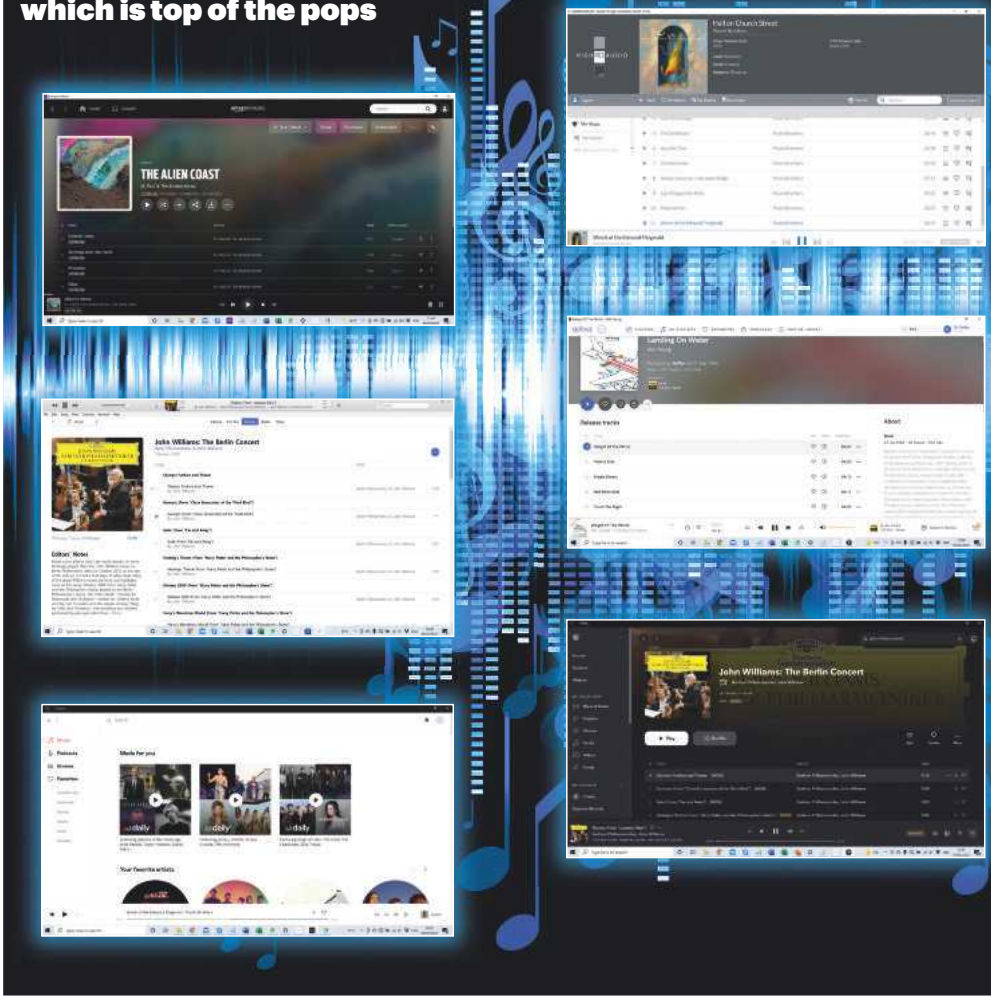

RSD 2022

Audiofile: Melco N10/2 digital music library

Music Legends: John Coltrane

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"He has a natural genius for transforming classic rock tropes into something that sounds thrillingly fresh and original"

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Never miss an issue – turn to p126 for our latest subs offer

Picture credit: Chuck Stewart Photography (John Coltrane)

Top tenners

New flagship digital music library from Japan

PRICE: £7,000-£9,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** MELCO-AUDIO-MASTERS.COM

JAPANESE SPECIALIST MELCO Audio has launched a new two-box digital music library, the N10/2, which it's describing as: "the best-performing Melco music library in the company's history".

The N10/2 is available in either HDD (N10/2-H50) or SSD (N10/2-S38) guises, with the former a direct replacement for the original N10 and the latter supplanting the previous SSD flagship, the N1Z/2EX. The libraries centre around newly selected drives: 5TB in the N10/2-H50 and 3.84TB in the N10/2-S38. The N10/2 also benefits from a new high-performance PCB, first seen in Melco's limited-edition N10 45th Anniversary Limited Edition – now sold out.

The N10/2 is a two-box design, featuring a half-width (215mm) chassis, enabling the signal-processing electronics to be kept separate from the power supply. The 'head' unit contains the processing electronics and data connectivity, while the power unit has a low-noise linear power supply with toroidal transformer.

The company says that the head unit uses the same low-noise, high-precision digital music dataflow as its existing series and benefits from several familiar Melco USPs. The rear panel features twin Ethernet ports – LAN and Player – the latter being a dedicated port designed to connect directly to network streamers without the need for an intervening data switch. There are also twin USB 2.0 ports, plus a further front-panel USB, operating as a dedicated DAC output. The second USB port is for hook up to HDD/SSD and CD drives (CD 'rippers'), capacity expansion with Melco's E100 (or other) storage drive and easy backup to HDD/SSD drives.

In addition to Melco's software architecture, the N10/2 benefits from the company's Intelligent Music Library suite comprising MinimServer and SongKong software. The device is Roon Ready, DSD compatible and offers app control via DLNA/UPnP (in USB DAC mode) with support for Tidal, Qobuz and vTuner streaming with the

Melco Music HD app. Qobuz Downloader and HighResAudio.com also enable direct, hi-res downloads without a computer.

The N10/2 can also be used as a self-contained local hi-res digital music player when connected via a USB DAC; claimed data rates of up to 32-bit/384kHz and Octo DSD are supported, along with gapless and Melco markerless DSD.

Control comes via the aforementioned Melco Music HD app, from the front panel or from approved third-party RF remote handsets and for network playback, UPnP control point apps. The N10/2-H50 (HDD) is priced at £7,000, the N10/2-S38 (SSD) at £9,000. Both are available in black or silver finishes. ▶

The 'head' unit has the processing and connectivity, while the power unit has a low-noise linear power supply

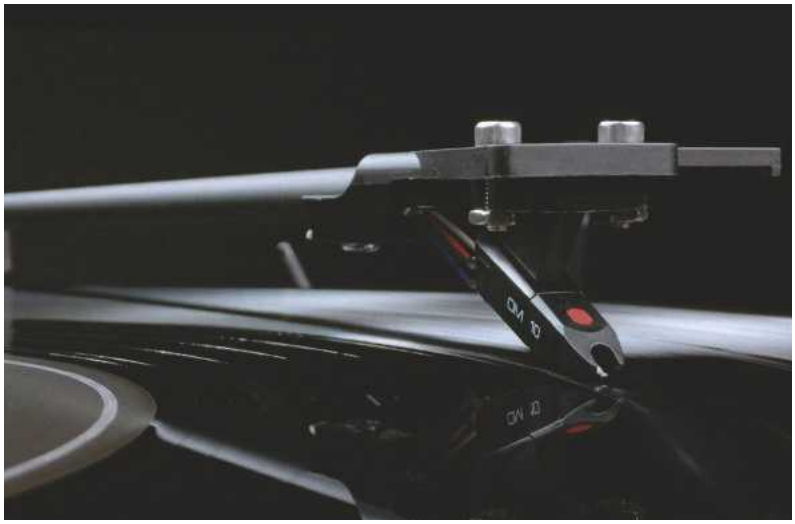
Automatic for the people

New affordable turntable range from UK

PRICE: £369 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** PROJECT-AUDIO.COM/EN HENLEYAUDIO.CO.UK

PRO-JECT HAS ADDED a new series to its collection of turntables. The Automat range will be the company's first fully automatic turntable series and its inaugural deck is the A1, which boasts "plug-and-play simplicity", electronically controlled playback speeds (33 and 45rpm), an 8.3in aluminium tonearm with carbon fibre reinforced anti-magnetic headshell. A pre-adjusted Ortofon OM 10 cartridge with elliptical stylus profile comes bundled, while a built-in switchable moving-magnet phono stage makes it ideal for first-time buyers. The damped metal platter is designed to decrease wow and flutter, while the resonance-damped wooden chassis and silicon-damped feet offer extra protection from unwanted vibrations. It comes with a premium semi-symmetrical Connect-IT E phono cable, gold-plated RCA output connectors and dust cover.

The A1 measures 430 x 130 x 365mm (WxHxD), weighs 5.6kg and comes in a black finish. Check out our review of Pro-ject's Debut PRO turntable on page 22. ▶



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Hi Fi News, April 2022

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Party on

A plethora of new launches coming from JBL via Harman Luxury Audio

PRICE: £130-£450 **AVAILABLE:** VARIED **WEB:** HARMANLUXURYAUDIO.COM

BUSY TIMES AT JBL as the US company introduces its new 4305P Studio Monitor – its first powered product and most compact model in the consumer Studio Monitor range. The 4305P is a self-contained active loudspeaker system, with 300Wrms total system power built-in, a 24-bit/192kHz DAC and six inputs that can be used with a wide variety of digital and analogue audio sources.

Additional features include a selectable bass contour control to compensate for acoustic differences in speaker placement and a signal-sensing line-level output for hook up to an external powered subwoofer.

The 4305P's integrated streaming engine provides both wired and wireless network audio capabilities via Ethernet, Google Chromecast Built-in, Apple AirPlay 2 and Bluetooth. Connections include asynchronous USB and optical digital inputs plus a 3.5mm analogue input with combination XLR/phono connectors and a selectable input sensitivity switch for use with balanced or unbalanced signals.

Primary and secondary

The Studio Monitor system consists of a primary and secondary speaker with selectable L/R assignment. The primary loudspeaker includes front panel controls for volume, mute, input selection and Bluetooth pairing, plus all physical inputs on its rear. In addition, the 4305P includes a Bluetooth remote and can be controlled as part of a Google Home or Apple AirPlay ecosystem. When operating with a wireless connection between with primary and secondary, the 4305P delivers audio resolution up to 96kHz. When tethered with the included 2m Digital Link cable, audio resolution can be extended to 192kHz. The 4305P can render MQA audio files and is certified Roon Ready.

As with the larger models in the Studio Monitor range, the 4305P utilises patented JBL transducer technologies. A 2410H 53mm compression driver is mated to a High-Definition Imaging horn for: "crystal-clear highs and life-like dynamic capabilities". A 133mm cast frame, fiber-composite cone driver operates in a bass-reflex configuration with dual front-firing tuned ports. Each of the transducers is powered by an internal Class D amplifier delivering 25W to each compression driver and 125W to each bass driver for a total system power of 300Wrms. JBL is including a free 90-day Qobuz trial along with a curated playlist of songs to highlight the: "audio available".

The enclosure of the 4305P is constructed from 6.35mm MDF with internal bracing and features a real wood veneer finish in a choice of natural Walnut with a blue grille or Black Walnut with a black grille. The 4305P Studio Monitor will be available in the first quarter of 2022 with a UK retail price still to be confirmed.

JBL's Live Pro 2 earbuds boast 11mm drivers and improved battery life

Meanwhile, the summer will see the launch of the PartyBox Encore, a party speaker that outputs 100W of sound and features a built-in lightshow that syncs to music. It also comes with a digital wireless microphone allowing partygoers to sing along with their favourite tunes. Engineered with a rubber-gripped handle, the PartyBox Encore is easily transportable, boasts up to 10 hours of battery life and an IPX4 splashproof design. The interface on the top of the PartyBox Encore enables users to control the lightshow, volume and microphone settings and through the dedicated app, partygoers can also customise their own lightshow including fun strobe effects and club lights that sync to the beat of the music. It supports wireless Bluetooth Streaming 5.1 plus playback from USB and aux-In inputs and comes with a digital wireless microphone (AA batteries included). The PartyBox Encore will retail at £300.

JBL's portable Pulse 5 (above), Live Pro 2 in-ears (left) and the light show emitting PartyBox Encore (bottom)

JBL is also introducing two new products to its portable speaker lineup with both boasting new designs and the company's Original Pro Sound. The Pulse 5 pairs 360° immersive sound with an LED lightshow while the BoomBox 3 features a new three-way acoustic speaker design and promises 24 hours of playtime.

The Pulse 5 claims 12-hours of playtime on a single charge, while its IP67 waterproof and dustproof rating is intended to ensure the speaker can handle almost any environment

The 4305P is an active speaker with 300Wrms total power built-in

including beach and pool time. It comes with a rope strap for portability and can wirelessly connect to the range of other PartyBoost-enabled speakers including other compatible JBL Pulses. The company says: "Partygoers can choose colours and effects to suit any vibe through the JBL Portable app whether music is on or off."

Via wireless Bluetooth streaming 5.3 it can connect up to two different smartphones or tablets and is expected to cost £220.

The BoomBox 3 is a three-way speaker system consisting of a racetrack-shaped subwoofer, two midrange drivers and two tweeters. The newly designed portable speaker claims a much deeper bass than its predecessor, 24 hours of playtime and IP67 rating for water and dustproofing. It's fitted with a metal handle with an orange silicone grip and boasts a built-in, rechargeable Li-ion battery power bank. The Bluetooth connection matches the Pulse 5 and it comes in black and 'squad' colour options, priced £450.

JBL has also upgraded its Live true wireless headphone series to include True Adaptive noise cancelling with smart ambient features, improved battery life and six microphones. The Live Pro 2 earbuds feature 11mm drivers in a 'stick' closed design with oval tubes intended to provide better noise cancellation and enhanced audio quality. The True Adaptive noise cancelling with smart ambient feature enables users to adjust the amount of background noise they want to let in to stay aware of surroundings or hear conversations without having to remove the earbuds. The hands-free support and dedicated JBL headphone app allow for access to preferred voice assistants. It's IPX5 waterproof and splashproof-rated and the embedded six microphones are designed to isolate noise and wind. It claims up to 40 hours of playback (10 hours in the earbud; 30 hours from the charging case), costs £130 and comes in blue, black and white.

The stunning 4305P Studio Monitor (above) and BoomBox 3 (below)

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PRICE: £1,350 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** KLIPSCH.COM

KLIPSCH IS THE official headphone and portable audio partner of the McLaren Formula 1 team and has added The Fives McLaren Edition powered speakers to its collection of co-branded products. The company says the loudspeakers: "combine McLaren Racing's renowned design ethos and use of advanced materials with Klipsch's legendary high-fidelity audio and technical innovation".

Klipsch The Fives McLaren Edition include an integrated phono preamp, Bluetooth, digital optical, analogue RCA, USB inputs and a subwoofer output. The speaker offers full compatibility with PCM music files up to 24-bit/192kHz.

The company's engineers designed the high-excursion carbon fibre bass driver cone from scratch to ensure maximum output with minimal cone break up for detailed, deep, dynamic bass and decreased distortion. The result, they say: "is a big, bold soundstage and a better listening experience than the common soundbar."

The speakers come in hand-painted super matte black finish with accents of McLaren's signature papaya colour adorned with McLaren's speedmark logo, signature papaya tweeters, control panel, nylon-braided speaker and power cables, a stability pad inspired by Formula 1's intermediate racing tyre tread and a laser-etched Klipsch/McLaren paddock garage sign.

The Fives are compatible with the Klipsch Connect app, giving users access to customise EQ and subwoofer volume settings, dynamic bass, night listening mode, over-the-air firmware upgrades and a digital quick-start guide.

Klipsch's The Fives McLaren Edition, slow coaches need not apply

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Signal paths are kept as short and as simple as possible, with gain preferably in one device, and utilizing four-layer circuit boards to more easily and effectively design circuitry with the most direct connection of components to reduce distortion and eliminate noise.

Non-essential signal carrying wires are eliminated, exemplified by the use of surface mount components when possible and by directly connecting the output stage to the speaker binding posts free of wires or solder to interfere with power delivery.

▶ For more details, go to Primare.net

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Last call

Full-size Bluetooth wireless headphone from Japan

PRICE: £119 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: SNEXT-FINAL.COM/EN

EXCLUSIVELY PREVIEWED IN last month's noise-cancelling headphone *Group Test*, Japanese high-end audio specialist Final is now releasing the UX3000, the brand's first full-size Bluetooth 5.0 wireless headphone featuring ANC, with hybrid noise cancellation.

In addition to SBC, aptX and AAC, the UX3000 supports aptX LL – a low-latency codec that delivers high-quality sound with minimal interruptions and time delay. The headband can be folded, it comes with a storage pouch and is made with a soft-textured, dirt and fingerprint-resistant black Shibo (Japanese for 'wrinkle' on the surface of paper or leather) coating.

The UX3000 supports multi-point connection so users can connect two Bluetooth devices at the same time for listening to music and taking incoming calls. The button controls govern volume, play/pause, ANC and power. Claimed playback time is 25 hours with ANC or 35 hours without, and charging time is quoted at 2.5 hours. Accessories include a USB C charging and 3.5mm audio cable.

Alp yourself

New turntable range from Switzerland

PRICE: £220-£250 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: LENCO.UK

SWISS COMPANY LENCO has introduced the 400 range, a new collection of simple-to-setup LS-400 belt-driven turntables, each complete with four built-in speakers – two of which are 15W and two at 10W. The series comes with Bluetooth 5.0, making it possible to stream music directly to the speakers from a smartphone or tablet, while the included USB port allows users to digitise their record collection.

Each turntable comes equipped with a high-quality moving-magnet Audio-Technica cartridge, a start-stop button and built-in preamplifier, which can be switched on and off as desired. The series features the LS-410, which comes in a walnut wood finish and costs £220, the LS-430 in imitation black or brown leather for £240 and the LS-440 in blue/beige or grey for £250. The 430 and 440 models are also equipped with pitch control and tone control that can be adjusted to the preference of the listener. All come complete with a plastic dust cover. ▶

Immerse yourself

Lightweight wireless earphones with 360 Reality Audio

PRICE: £150 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** AUDIO-TECHNICA.COM

AUDIO-TECHNICA HAS LAUNCHED its Sony 360 Reality Audio-certified ATH-CKS50TW true wireless earphone – a new lightweight model, which the company claims provides 20 hours of continuous playback or 15 hours with noise cancelling enabled. "Use of the charging case allows as much as 50 hours of use on the go," according to AT and charging for 10 minutes provides up to 90 minutes of continuous playback when noise cancelling is disabled.

"Additionally, there's a feed-forward active noise-cancelling function, which ensures an immersive audio experience – even in noisy environments."

360 Reality Audio is an immersive music experience that uses Sony's object-based 360 Spatial Sound technology and allows any audio input to be placed in a 360° spherical soundfield, from the instruments, vocals or sound of a live audience.

Connect more

The earphones' multi-pairing allows listeners to connect to both their smartphone and computer or tablet at the same time without switching. They employ large-diameter 9mm HD TWS drivers to deliver deep, powerful bass, boasting an "easy-to-wear", secure fit intended to prevent them falling out. A unique antenna design is intended to help ensure a stable connection even when in crowded places, while an IPX4-equivalent JIS/IEC protection rating guarantees they can withstand splashing from any direction. There is Fast Pair for connection with Android devices, while an LED light indicates remaining battery power.

The ATH-CKS50TW automatically powers on when removed from the case and boasts Qualcomm TrueWireless Mirroring for independent transmission to the left and right sides, aptX Adaptive Audio and adjustable sound quality, volume and equaliser settings via the Connect app.

Air apparent

Speaker cable import from Germany

PRICE: £770-£1,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** IN-AKUSTIK.DE/EN KARMA-AV.CO.UK

KARMA-AV IS NOW distributing German company in-akustik's Reference LS-404 Micro Air speaker cables in the UK. According to the company, the 'Micro Air' technology aims to minimise the physical filter effect of cables by deploying air as a dielectric to insulate concentric copper conductors, which are helically arranged according to a proprietary design. A thin layer of polyethylene protects the pure copper from oxidation.

Accordingly, the new Reference LS-404 Micro Air speaker cable uses air as the insulation surrounding a total of eight concentric copper conductors in a multi-core architecture, arranged so that the magnetic fields of the positive and negative conductors overlap and neutralise each other. The claim is that this spec reduces the inductance of the cable, promoting a faithful transmission of the audio signal over a broad frequency range with precise timing, making the LS-404 Micro Air particularly effective with larger floorstanding loudspeakers.

The Reference LS-404 Micro Air is available with BFA banana or spade connectors or as an Easy-Plug version. The surfaces of the BFA bananas and the spades are finished with a rhodium coating. Contact surfaces are manufactured from a single piece to minimise contact resistance. The pricing is as follows: LS-404 Micro Air Easy Plug Single Wire 2x 3m: £770; LS-404 Micro Air Easy Plug Single Bi-Wire 2x 3m: £790; LS-404 Micro Air 4mm Banana Single Wire 2x 3m: £860; LS-404 Micro Air 4mm Banana Single Bi-Wire 2x 3m: £950; LS-404 Micro Air SPADE Single Wire 2x 3m: £900; and LS-404 Micro Air SPADE Single Bi-Wire 2x 3m: £1,000.

Cabled bodied

Mid-range speaker cable from Scotland

PRICE: £1,400-£4,400 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** ATLASCABLES.COM

Atlas Cables from Kilmarnock is also launching a new speaker cable this month, the Ailsa Achromatic. Joining the Ailsa Achromatic interconnect launched in 2021, Ailsa is pitched between the company's Hyper and Mavros ranges and offers users OCC (Ohno Continuous Cast) conductor technology and microporous PTFE dielectrics at a lower price point than previously available.

The AASC consists of 2x 3mm² OCC multi-stand copper conductors wrapped in a microporous PTFE dielectric. This is enhanced with super stabilised conductor geometry (SSG isolation layer), an extruded outer layer that keeps the multiple strand conductor symmetrical and geometrically accurate. The cable is then packed out with anti-vibration cotton filler and finished with a high-gloss grey jacket.

The Ailsa Achromatic comes terminated with the company's Achromatic Z (4mm plugs) or S (spade terminals). Atlas explains: "Being low mass and non-conductive, the plug body eliminates the detrimental effects of circulating eddy currents, while also being self-cleaning. The result is a superior cable with minimal discernible character, which allows a user's system to convey a coherent balance of detail, timing and dynamics."

The Ailsa Achromatic speaker cable is available in pre-packaged lengths with Z or S connections, priced as follows: 2m £1,400; 3m £2,000; 5m £3,200; and 7m for £4,400.

Emperor's new groove

Enhanced motor drive for turntables

PRICE: £7,950 **AVAILABLE:** NOW **WEB:** VERTEREACOUSTICS.COM

VERTERE HAS UNVEILED its new Imperium Motor Drive, which the company says was driven by owners of its SG-1 and RG-1 turntables looking for an affordable motor drive superior in performance to its Tempo, which was launched last year. The new design derives from Vertere's Reference Motor Drive and includes a simplified power supply and control functions.

The purpose, according to Vertere, was to make a motor drive: "with as pure a sine and cosine wave output and as little noise as possible. The design and cabling also had to consider possible RF pickup and ingress."

Enclosed in a shell precision CNC milled from solid aluminium is a twin-regulated linear power supply feeding the primary circuit, the 12V external supply for the record player's illumination and the digital regulation for the microprocessor and DAC. The double screened programmable and updatable microprocessor digitally generates the sine and cosine waves (the claim is it's switchable to be ± 0, 0.25 percent, 0.5 percent) to the equally double-screened DAC. The output of the DAC feeds two 'power amps' provided by: "an extremely clean" supply to drive the approximately 17V the motor requires.

The Imperium boasts a gold-plated, two-layer PCB utilising extensive ground planes and fully regulated voltage rails powering different circuit sections – components which the company says have been carefully selected to ensure in-control and 'clean' final delivery of power to the motor. The PCB mixes SMD and thru-hole components, copper foil shields the entire digital, microprocessor and DAC circuitry and then the whole PCB is secondarily shielded using a stainless-steel plate.

The motor drive output is a gold-plated 7-way thread-locked DIN connector, joining Imperium power to the turntable via a dedicated motor link cable.

Imperium is supplied fully optimised and set up for the record player motor. In the case of an upgrade, the retailer can adjust the output voltage and phase for the lowest motor noise and vibration. This is adjustable for 33 and 45rpm rotational speeds. The Imperium comes with a motor link and 2m Redline mains cable.

Stands that deliver

Stylish supports for US amps

PRICE: £3,500-£4,000 **AVAILABLE:** NOW
WEB: MCINTOSHLABS.COM FINESOUNDS.UK

MCINTOSH IS RELEASING a new set of dedicated amplifier stands – the AS125 and AS901 – specifically engineered to provide support for the US company's highest-performance monoblocks, integrated amplifiers and other hi-fi components.

The stands are crafted from sustainably sourced, solid white ash said to be resistant to scratches and dents. They are constructed using a face-glued technique and feature an edge-grain top, which the company says provides extreme strength, durability and stability.

The stands boast a 7.62cm-thick primary wood slab, finished with multiple coats of jet-black stain, plus a catalysed lacquer topcoat to provide added vibrancy and depth. There's also a McIntosh logo faceplate, illuminated via the rear-mounted power control ports and the four feet feature protective pads to both minimise vibration and protect floors.

The AS125 measures: 45 x 10 x 45cm (WxHxD) and costs £3,500. The AS901 is the same width and height, but is 30cm longer and will set you back £4,000.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Pro-Ject Debut PRO

ORIGIN
Austria

TYPE
Belt-driven turntable system with electric speed control

WEIGHT
6kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
415 x 113 x 320mm

FEATURES
- 33, 45 & 78rpm
- Pick it PRO MM cartridge
- 8.6in one-piece carbon-aluminium sandwich tonearm

DISTRIBUTOR
Henley Audio Ltd.

WEBSITE
project-audio.com
henleyaudio.co.uk

The heart of the platter

Dubbed the 'most audiophile' Debut turntable yet, this deck/arm/cartridge solution takes over from last year's popular Debut Carbon with a host of new useful refinements

Like the Land Rover and Ray-Ban sunglasses, the Pro-Ject Debut comes in many different flavours. What started out as a pure entry-level product has been joined by enough siblings over the last 20 years that the latest Debut PRO reviewed here can be regarded as the range's flagship and crowning glory. The numerous improvements might elevate the price to £700, but even that has done little to undermine this turntable's bargain status.

Pro-Ject CEO Heinz Lichtenegger maintains that the steps up the scale continue the mission statement of the most recent Debut, the Carbon EVO (*HFC* 468). Lichtenegger explains: "The Carbon EVO was designed to give people with a moderate budget a record deck with an 'entry audiophile' attitude. The idea of the PRO is to further squeeze any compromises you'd expect in a budget turntable."

This even extends to the name, which is particularly evocative for any product in the domestic sector. "PRO was chosen," he continues, "to motivate the people who may be considering digging deeper into real high-end turntable design, but who still do not want to spend crazy money."

Accounting for the £250 uplift over the Debut Carbon EVO, Lichtenegger recites a list of features which starts with improved motor isolation, on to height adjustment achieved through TPE-damped metal feet, while VTA alignment has been added to make future cartridge upgrades possible further down the line.

This flexibility is almost a mantra for Lichtenegger, as he mentions moving coils frequently. The aluminium platter is more heavily damped, and anti-magnetic, which he says is a boon for upgrades to MC cartridges, rightly observing: "You almost never see a 1.6kg platter at this price point – usually it's 300g, glass and prone to ringing.

"The tonearm is a sandwich of a central tube of aluminium surrounded by carbon fibre, for better damping and higher effective mass." He stresses that this, too, is important for any future moving-coil upgrades. "As you know, ultimately an MC is the heaven of analogue."

The tonearm utilises massive gimbals and nickel coating, the latter said to increase the rigidity of the bearing for free and fluid movement as well as providing a longer-lasting finish. "After the passage of time, painted or anodised black surfaces will turn greyish."

Lichtenegger is passionate about the importance of the positioning of the Debut PRO in the Pro-Ject turntable lineup. He emphatically wants it to top the Debut line.

"The Debut PRO is the ultimate manifestation of the Debut line. It is our 30th anniversary product, so we put in all that we could think about improving a Debut, taking it beyond the Debut Carbon EVO."

More more more

"When you go to costlier high-end decks, if they're really better, you should experience greater quietness, less nervous behaviour and more authority" the CEO explains. "With the new Pick it PRO cartridge, the new heavy platter, the massive feet and, of course, the new tonearm design, it's all about more stability and greater subtlety, without sacrificing any retrieval of details."

Pro-Ject co-designed the new moving-magnet cartridge with Ortofon's Leif Johanson in order: "to give a more substantial, more full-bodied sound," says Lichtenegger. "In Leif, we found a great partner who worked out exactly the sound balance we wanted for the Debut PRO. We intended to give it more body, very pleasant to hear, but still keep the refinement of the 2M cartridge line."

Initial press pictures preceding the arrival of the deck showed a puck, but none is provided with the PRO. It turns out that this is an optional add-on and during testing we discover that the Debut PRO categorically benefits from a puck or clamp, so we employ one throughout the listening sessions. Lichtenegger explains that they have designed a dedicated puck, as seen in the preliminary literature: "which matches the Debut PRO perfectly, not too heavy for the type of bearing – for more weighty pucks, you also need bigger bearing assemblies."

The new puck, a plated metal disc, will sell for around £40. Alternatively, you can use Pro-Ject's £75 Clamp it, which promises an even tighter grip and, at 120g, applies pressure to the record without stressing the bearing.

There's no escaping the fact that the Debut PRO is easy to adore and even easier to set up. We have it up and running in under 15 minutes – and that's without a manual. Anyone who has ever set up a Debut before will recognise every element, by now aware, too, that there is also a spare belt for 78rpm usage. We decide to settle on 1.8g for the tracking force of the new cartridge, based on our previous experience with Ortofon's 2M Red (*HFC* 345).

As the Pick it PRO is essentially a straightforward Ortofon 2M in so many ways – any differences to the cantilever, stylus, *etc*. being kept under wraps – it is an easy feed into the MM stages of four wildly differing phono stages we have to hand, ranging in price from under £400 to over £6,000. This package will cause you no worries whatsoever, for it's as close to plug and play as a turntable/arm/cartridge combo gets.

Sound quality

In other words, just a *soupçon* of experience and a helping of common sense will have this turntable fully optimised for your system in no time. The only proviso is that the gains of a puck are too great to ignore, the felt mat slipping around if not secured from above. With the classic edition of George Benson's *Breezin'* it is all too clear to hear the positive effects of a puck in nearly every area.

We stress this because the puck used is a £10 purchase from Amazon, so we are not talking about breaking the bank. While the PRO undoubtedly invites upgrades, and not just Lichtenegger's prediction that owners will court MCs, we use the supplied cables and felt mat. Just mentioning them, though, tells you that you can have a field day experimenting with tweaks – which is as it should be, when they don't cost the earth.

In fighting form, the most staggering element of the Debut PRO is the solidity and extension of the bass.

Even in stock form, the Debut PRO joins the best sub-£1,000 front-end combos

This extracts all the weight of the Benson recording – ultra-expressive lower registers courtesy of the legendary Phil Upchurch. But a Benson LP is all about voice and guitar, and the Debut PRO is a more-than-competent deliverer of richness in all areas – a boon for Benson's honeyed tones.

As for his guitar work, speed and attack are as much about the experience as the fluidity, however mutually exclusive the two might seem. The Debut PRO – and, for that matter, the Pick it PRO – manage to balance the two, so Lichtenegger is right: the PRO does indeed convey body and fatigue-free listening without any blatant loss of detail. Probably the only thing missing, which would be a reason to consider an MC, is a touch more air and space.

Not that the sound is congested in any way – we're being brutal about this, having played with the Debut ▶

HOW IT COMPARES

With Pro-Ject all but dominating the 'affordable' turntable market, the brand is just as often competing with itself as with other vinyl stalwarts like Rega and Mo-Fi. Of the latter, Rega's Planar 3 (*HFC* 411) with RB330 tonearm and Audio-Technica AT-VM95E pick-up costs a very similar £700 (the factory-fitted Elys 2 MM is not currently offered). This package delivers a very tight, tuneful and insightful performance that should probably be heard against the Debut PRO before buying. Otherwise Thorens' £600 TD 202 is well worth checking out as a 'full solution' complete with AT-95E pick-up and built-in phono stage. It makes no claims to be a 'purist' product, but what it does, it does surprisingly well, offering an easy-to-set-up budget vinyl experience with cheery panache.

IN SIGHT

1. Newly designed tonearm base allows easy adjustment of arm height/VTA
2. Gold-plated RCA analogue outputs and earthing post
3. Damped and height-adjustable aluminium feet
4. Bundled felt mat
5. TPE damped and non-magnetic 1.6kg platter

IN SIGHT

1. 8x hand-painted MDF plinth
2. Precision CNC milled and nickel coated bearing block
3. 8.6in one-piece carbon-aluminium sandwich tonearm
4. Pick it PRO MM cartridge
5. 33.3 and 45 rpm speed selector (78rpm belt is also provided)

DURABLE DEBUT

The Debut was born out of an idea formed in the summer of 1998 by long-time UK distributor of Pro-Ject Audio Systems, Laurence Armstrong, and company founder Heinz Lichtenegger. The two were together in Austria discussing ideas to develop the 'analogue market' and soon returned to Lichtenegger's original thinking behind the formative Pro-Ject 1 turntable launched in 1991. The brief was simple: a turntable that was affordable enough to be considered an 'add-on sale' in stores, but that could wow would-be purchasers with a convincing audiophile performance as soon as it was plugged in. Within a day of their new concept taking shape, a sample was produced in the company's Czech factory by Jiri Kroutil, Pro-Ject's original product manager, and within a matter of months the Debut was flying off shelves and an audio icon was born...

In the early Noughties, the Debut II arrived with a variety of colour finishes and new features including a built-in speed controller and phono stage. This was swiftly followed by the Debut III, also among the first hi-fi turntables to include a USB output. The Debut's status was consolidated at its highest ever price point in 2012 with the Debut Carbon and its carbon fibre tonearm. In 2020, over 20 years since the original concept, the latest iteration – the £450 Debut Carbon EVO (*HFC* 468), was launched to the same generally high praise, suggesting, if we hadn't realised this before, that Armstrong and Lichtenegger really were on to something all that time ago!

PRO right after using a package costing ten times its price. But the gains you would realistically hope to achieve over this, when the time comes to upgrade, would be matters of scale, perhaps a touch more stage depth. Auditioned in context, the Debut PRO yields nothing, as is clearly demonstrated with William Bell's *The Soul Of A Bell*. This is more about voice than anything else, despite the usual peerless backing that all Stax releases employ.

His sublime composition *You Don't Miss Your Water* exhibits vocal textures so convincing we start to have second thoughts about MCs. The warmth in the voice defies the technology of the phono stages, vivid and apparent whether through all-valve or solid-state step ups. 'Coherent' replaces 'competent' in our summation as this deck certainly earns its suffix, 'PRO' being less of a conceit and more a statement of intent. This is made even more evident when we turn the screw and subject it to a slightly knackered copy of *The Best Of The Lettermen*. Of course, we have no way of knowing how much high-frequency content has been shaved off over the years by abuse, but the Pick it PRO extracts each of the three voices in their own sonic turf, blending them with such authority that we end up digging out a copy on open-reel tape for comparison purposes. Miraculously we come to the conclusion that we no longer consider their takes of The Beatles' *Yesterday* or Victor Young and Edward Heyman's *When I Fall In Love* as exercises in schmaltz.

Even better, as harmonising is dominating the mood, is the sublime Analogue Productions release of The Beach Boys' *Smiley Smile*. Even the freaky weird numbers like *Vegetables* and *Wind Chimes* are captivating, but the LP's two inarguable masterpieces – *Heroes And Villains* and *Good Vibrations* – provide further evidence that the retrieval of detail hasn't been compromised in any way. Both are studio creations of almost absurd complexity, on a par with The Beatles' releases of the same period – that heady year of 1967.

Whatever bizarre sounds Brian Wilson chose to employ, the Debut PRO handles with aplomb. And that includes the Theremin, the signature sound of *Good Vibrations* and a rare example of electronic sound that doesn't immediately suggest artifice. Throughout the album, though, are the harmonies of a group that ranks in the permanent Top 10, along with The Mills Brothers, The Ink Spots, The Hollies, The Everlys and the rest. As with The Lettermen (Capitol Records must have had a thing about harmony), the sound is ethereal yet palpable throughout. How's that for a superhuman juggling act?

The most staggering part of the Debut PRO is the solidity and extension of the bass

Conclusion

Spinning over 30 LPs on the Debut PRO, we leave it convinced that it begs to be heard by the sort of audiophile-in-waiting Lichtenegger designed it for, just as it begs the use of a puck or clamp. We'd love to spend more time with it, if only to see just how far the various upgrades can take it – the easy swaps like trick cables, outré mats and whatever MC cartridge one cares to fit. But even in stock form, it joins the best of sub-£1,000 front-end combinations. 'Entry level' has a new champion ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Price; ease of use; simple setup; expansive sound; future upgrade options

DISLIKE: Nothing at the price

WE SAY: Hard to better at entry level

OVERALL ★★★★★

BAT

"OUTSTANDING!"

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

"...an imperious blend of lush looks, audiophile engineering and stellar performance across all musical flavours."

VK-3500 amp, Hi Fi News September 2021

"more delicacy than my ears could process...Musical? Naturalistic? Intimate? Take your pick."

VK-80i amp, Hi Fi News December 2021

"this unashamedly expensive converter gets you closer to the music without you even realising it's doing it. Just let it weave its magic..."

REX 3 DAC, Hi Fi News May 2020

Balanced Audio Technology
balanced.com

karma
audio-visual

How we test

Hi-Fi Choice employs the most methodical test and measurement regime in the business. Here's how we do it...

Unique group tests

Our *Group Tests* are supported by rigorous and exhaustive listening tests carried out by experts

STREAMING SERVICES GROUP TEST

THIS MONTH'S ROUND up employs a headphone-based setup for testing. As well as providing a point of difference to the previous streaming services test, it also covers off higher than normal noise levels in our testing environment over the time that the evaluations are carried out due to building work nearby. A Lenovo T15P ThinkPad and 2021 iPad Pro are used throughout, with both devices connected via USB to the iFi Neo iDSD DAC (*HFC* 482) and Meze Audio's Liric headphones.

The iFi combines MQA compatibility with the ability to show the sample rate it is receiving at the time; invaluable when that sample rate might not be the one you expect!

As many of the streaming services offer direct audio options, they are run consecutively rather than all at once while all the others are shut down. With Primephonic now out of the test lineup, all services are tasked with the same four tracks as one another, simplifying the listening process. As well as the test programme, each service is also used with a wider selection of content while the additional apps and services that are on offer are also put through their paces in order to help determine the final overall ranking. All prices quoted are from the websites of the providers, but it's worth searching around as you might be able to get better deals – ie: by paying an annual fee.

TEST MUSIC

NEIL YOUNG
Weight Of The World
Landing On Water

PUNCH BROTHERS
Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald
Hell On Church Street

JOHN WILLIAMS
Theme From Jurassic Park
Jurassic Park Collection

ST PAUL AND THE BROKEN BONES
The Last Dance
The Alien Coast

REFERENCE SYSTEM

USB NOISE FILTER:
AudioQuest JitterBug **£50** ***HFC* 407**

The JitterBug (in this case partnered with an AudioQuest Carbon USB cable) helps to ensure that no noise from the laptop makes itself felt in a test where the differences in the services can be very small and the minimum of external influence is needed.

DAC:
iFi Audio Neo iDSD **£800** ***HFC* 482**

After a strong showing in the recent *Group Test* and with the decision to switch back to headphones for this year's critical listening, the Neo iDSD makes for an excellent choice, thanks to its transparent performance and MQA compatibility.

HEADPHONES:
Meze Audio Liric
£1,800

The Liric is a fine choice for work like this as it combines a revealing and neutral presentation with excellent noise isolation and high comfort levels, ensuring that it doesn't become the story at any stage.

nucleus

by

roon

SIMPLY THE BEST WAY TO EXPERIENCE ROON

High-quality powerful fan-less optimised streaming server, powered by roon OS.

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

July 2018*

hi-fi news OUTSTANDING PRODUCT

April 2018*

*Reviews of the original Nucleus+, which has the same technical performance of the 2019 revision but with a different look.

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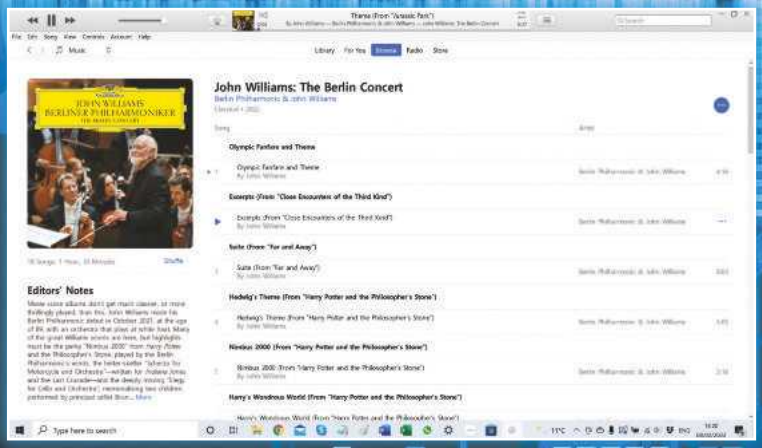
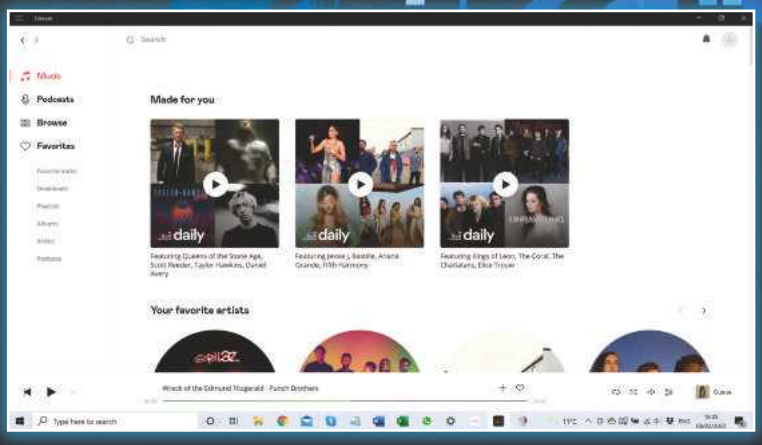
Grouptest

STREAMING SERVICES GROUP TEST £7.99/MONTH-£200/YEAR

Viva la resolution!

As the arrival of another big name into lossless and hi-res on-demand streaming alters the dynamic of the market once again, ***Ed Selley*** judges the runners and riders

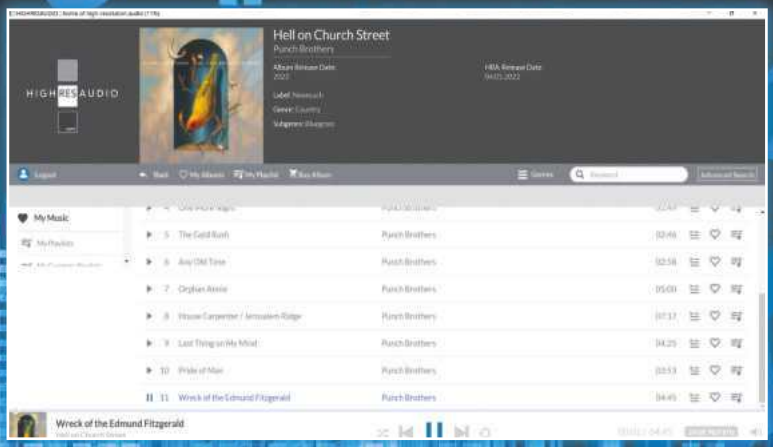


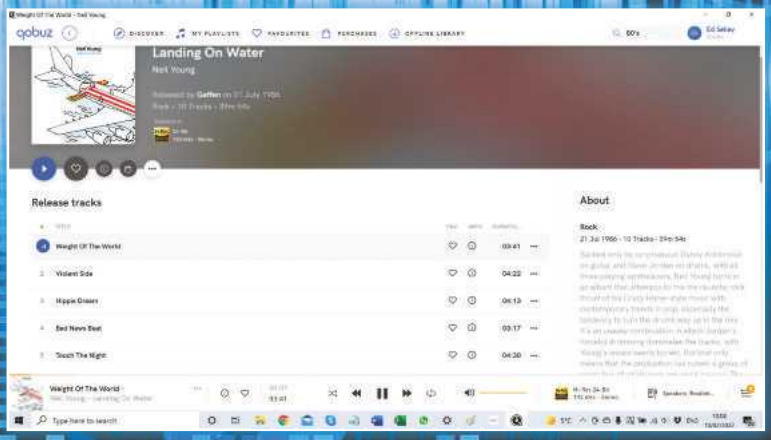


THE WORLD OF on-demand music streaming can be a sightly deceptive one. Viewed with a disinterested eye, things appear to change slowly, if at all. We've had on-demand music for over a decade now, initially as a compressed-only service, then with lossless, followed by hi-res options. Behind the scenes, though, the dynamics of what's on offer and why is fascinating as providers respond and tweak their services to counter what their rivals are up to.

This applies with particular significance to the last year. The early part of 2021 was dominated by the news that lossless Spotify – a service that hasn't featured in recent round ups because it only offers a lossy tier – was due before the end of the year. Here we are in early 2022, though, with no sign of this promised addition. In some ways, Spotify's announcement wasn't the big news, it was the response it provoked. Apple Music, which had been exclusively lossy up to this point, joined Amazon in offering not just lossless but hi-res too.

Neither was this the only change to all the participating services. Primephonic, which participated in our last two round ups, was purchased by Apple and its classical music search and metadata functionality has been incorporated into Apple's wider offering. Tidal, meanwhile, has introduced a lossless-only HiFi tier that sees it ready to take on lossless Spotify as and when it makes an appearance. As such, we'll be looking at our six challengers and, while sound quality remains the main concern, we'll also be taking into account which balances value and features best to come out on top and offer the ultimate all-round option. ▶





ON TEST

amazon music UNLIMITED

Amazon Music Unlimited from £7.99/month p30
Newly reduced in price, with: "HD at no extra cost", Amazon represents keen value for money and the claimed 90 million+ track library is competitive. It's also the preferred service of Amazon's Alexa.

Music

Apple Music £9.99/month p32
Newly bolstered with both hi-res content and Primephonic's classical music know-how, Apple claims: "over 90 million" tracks, together with spatial audio options as well as flexible family and student price plans.

DEEZER PREMIUM

Deezer Premium £11.99/month p35
Deezer clearly feels that its Premium offering ain't broke so it remains unfixed. Material is available exclusively in 16/44.1 FLAC and library size is quoted at over 90 million. The excellent Flow learning algorithm also remains untouched.

HIGH RES AUDIO .com

High Res Audio Streaming £79.99 for 6 months p36
HRA has made some tweaks to its pricing, but it remains focussed exclusively on hi-res content only, backed up with a pretty comprehensive online store.

qobuz

Qobuz Studio Premier From £10.83/month p38
A further price cut has kept Qobuz in competition with rivals and some decent family deals have been added too. Annual subs also offer discounts on the library of purchasable material.

TIDAL

Tidal HiFi Plus £19.99/month p40
Tidal's offering now has a lossless only 'HiFi' tier for £9.99/month below the HiFi Plus that we're looking at here. It remains the only service to make use of the MQA format for its high-resolution content.

Background image: Shutterstock.com

Amazon
Music Unlimited from £7.99/m

Amazon continues to refine and improve its service – except in one area where it really matters

DETAILS

PROVIDER
Amazon

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service

FEATURES
- Library claims: 90 million+ tracks
- Web browser and mobile apps available
- Format: 16/44.1 to 24/192 FLAC

Amazon made the decision to offer lossless and hi-res content back in 2019. What was initially a premium tier above the standard lossy one has now become the default offering and this is accompanied by a change in name to Music Unlimited. Pricing is very keen, with everything being available for £9.99 a month or £7.99 if you pay for Amazon Prime, which makes it the cheapest here.

The service itself offers a 90 million track library (as with everyone else, this includes repetition of the same track so is effectively useless as an actual measure of content) available in sample rates up to 24-bit/192kHz. If you're looking for a streaming service to also offer you curated content or bring new material to your attention it falls rather short as the playlists offered are pretty generic. The desktop interface is tidy and easy to use and gives information on sample rates available and being achieved (it pays to do so as the settings as installed do not allow for hi-res playback).

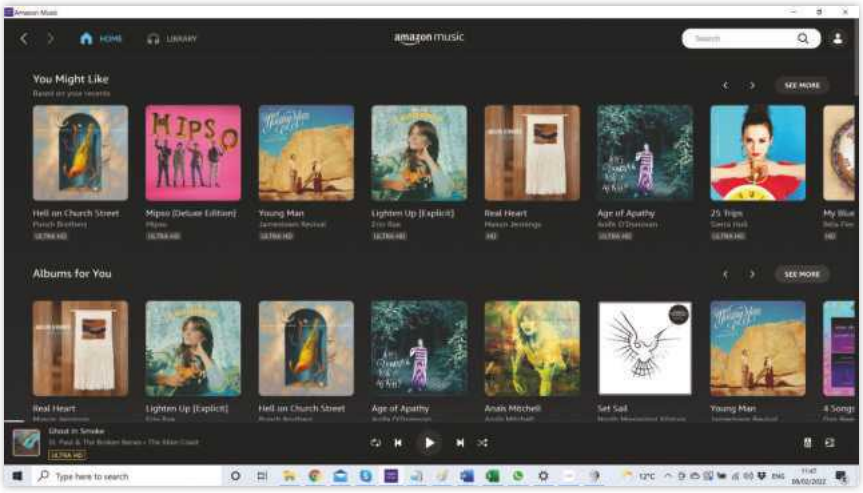
What Music Unlimited cannot do is the same thing the preceding versions could not do either. When used via the desktop app, the sample rate is decided by your operating system because there is no direct mode. If the sample rate of the music you're listening to changes, it will not change on the connected device until you manually adjust it in the sound settings. This is borderline unworkable when listening to albums and completely useless with a playlist of tracks at multiple sample rates. For a company that plans to make deliveries by drone in the future, this feels like an infuriating oversight that should be well within its technical remit to correct.

Sound quality

If you keep your sound settings menu box open next to the desktop app and make the pre-requisite changes, Amazon sounds competitive with the other services here. The Eighties time capsule presentation of *Weight Of The World* is presented in 24-bit/192kHz and there's a space and airiness to this recent remaster that makes for a pleasing listen. Young sounds smooth but usefully detailed. This same detail is also apparent on the 24-bit/96kHz version of the Punch Brother's *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald*. The exceptional musicianship is delivered with real nuance and the growing scale of the piece is well conveyed with a commendable low-end weight.

The full-size orchestra in *Jurassic Park* is audibly comprised of multiple musicians in the 24-bit/192kHz Amazon version. There's enough weight and scale for the performance to be compelling and the tonal realism on offer is very good too. Change tack completely and the unique 'post-apocalyptic disco' of *The Last Dance* (here in 24-bit/44.1kHz) is potent and rhythmically engaging. The funky bassline is delivered with the right level of urgency and without impinging on Paul Janeway's vocals.

The caveat to this positivity is that, if you simply let your computer set the sample rate – as it will do without constant intervention – this level of performance is not attained. Squashing the 24-bit/96kHz and 24-bit/192kHz recordings to 24-bit/48kHz results in some of the space present at native rates being lost. Resampling the 44.1kHz *Alien Coast* to 48kHz, sounds grainy and forced. Annoyingly, this is repeated in a different form on mobile devices too (see boxout) and makes using the service to its highest performance a constant chore ●



FIXED RATIONS

As if to ram home its disinterest in sample rate management, Amazon has ensured that its mobile apps are also similarly hampered. The iOS app is attractive and easy to use, but no amount of tweaking the settings will allow it to output at anything other than 24-bit/192kHz, which is something Amazon has decided to implement as it is not an automatic function in iOS to do this. The Android app is similarly locked, but this applies to many rivals too.

In better news, Amazon has been boosting its third-party support and you can now listen to it (at the correct sample rate no less) via the BluOS operating system and the ever-expanding range of products that support it. It is also configured to work with the Alexa voice control system and it seems to produce more reliable search results than a number of rival services conspire to do in the same setting.

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
INTEGRATION ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Price; interface; supporting apps; plenty of hi-res

DISLIKE: No USB audio management; odd mobile behaviour

WE SAY: Well priced and has likeable features, but the sample rate issues are infuriating

OVERALL ★★★★½

ROTEL®
Sit back, relax,
enjoy the music
Discover more at rotel.com/60years
60 ROTEL
EXCEPTIONAL AUDIO SINCE 1961

Apple Music £9.99/m

Forced to up its game by Spotify, Apple finally embraces hi-res. Shame about iTunes though...

DETAILS

PROVIDER
Apple

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service

FEATURES
- Library claims: 90 million+ tracks
- Web browser and mobile apps available
- Format: 16/44.1 to 24/192 ALAC

As surprises go, Apple's decision to move from compressed audio stalwart to purveyor of hi-res files was up there with the best of them. At a stroke, it went from exclusively operating in AAC to a library of ALAC material in resolutions between 44.1 and 192kHz. Given that vast swathes of Apple's hardware are completely incompatible with these resolutions, the notion that it was done purely to thwart Spotify is not without merit.

Regardless, the basics of Apple Music were convincing before the move was made and remain so now. The 90 million track library is subject to the same caveats as everyone else, but is still among the biggest here. Furthermore, Apple has also put the legwork in when it comes to curated content. There are some interesting playlists, a smattering of exclusive material and 'radio stations' that will play constant content based around a common theme. The search function is effective and it's fairly straightforward to find what you're looking for.

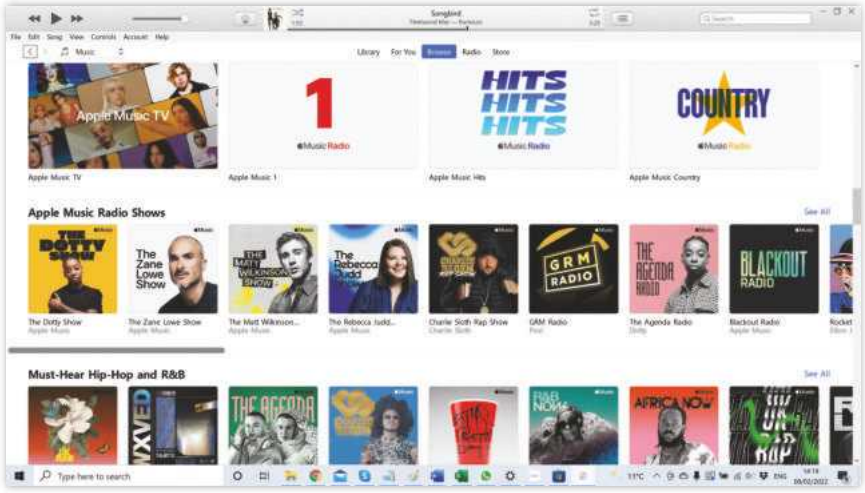
What Apple gives with one hand, it takes away with the other. Hi-res content is only available on OSX (Apple's desktop operating system), iOS (its mobile one) and (with caveats) Android. If you have a Windows machine, it can't access this material at all. Furthermore, the Windows version of iTunes through which Apple Music is available remains a Byzantine mess of various functionality stitched together into a single, creaking edifice. There's a web browser version, which doesn't change the lack of hi-res but does at least feel it was designed this century. Happily, the mobile apps go a long way to undoing this – although support outside them is limited (see boxout).

Sound quality

As testing via the Windows laptop would be largely pointless, the iPad stands in for it and Apple Music acquits itself well when used with the equivalent of a home field advantage. Sample rate adjustment is automatic and the 24-bit/192kHz *Weight Of The World* is punchy and dynamic. Young sounds detailed and tonally correct and the glossy presentation is well handled too. The Punch Brothers (here as a 24-bit/96kHz stream) sound sensational, the staccato string work at the beginning of *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald* is gorgeously tangible and the weight of the track as it builds is wonderfully handled.

The John Williams performance is barely less impressive. The orchestra is weighty and has enough space around it to give a sensation of the overall scale. It's possible to perceive the actions of the multiple musicians working as a cohesive whole and the fine details that make this recording as good as it is are stitched effortlessly into the wider performance. This ability to find little snippets of information is usefully apparent in *The Last Dance* too. The effect draws you in because it is compellingly and consistently realistic while sounding enormously propulsive and energetic.

Of course, if you switch back to Windows, absolutely none of this applies. Apple Music sounds congested, thin and confused across the same test material. Any audible notifications that occur while listening are played unless they're physically turned off in Windows. This feels very much like Apple standing on principle and deliberately limiting the availability of its service and there is no talk of it being adjusted any time soon. In this regard, it's the most conditional of all the services here in performance terms ●



NOT FOR SHARING

As you might expect, when Apple is given the scope to design its own app on its own operating system, the result is glorious and the iPad app in particular is the best of any streaming service here (the Android app is really rather nice too). If you're looking for a service purely for iOS, it's hard to make any argument against Apple Music.

The problem Apple Music has is that, compared with pretty much every other service here, the options for using it with third-party equipment are very limited. Sonos has a dedicated app for its service, but there's nothing else available. Until lossless was a big deal, this wasn't an issue as you simply used AirPlay via those excellent mobile apps, but that has strictly limited bandwidth. At the moment, it's difficult to use Apple Music with a home hi-fi system and Apple doesn't seem to be rushing to change that.

HI-FI Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆
INTEGRATION ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★☆
OVERALL ★★★★☆

LIKE: Sounds excellent through the mobile apps; curated content

DISLIKE: Limited Windows and third-party app support

WE SAY: Used in the way that Apple wants you to use it, Apple Music is excellent but wider support is limited

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

The French maestro takes a superficially limited offering and adds a selection of hidden depths

DETAILS

PROVIDER
Deezer

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service

FEATURES
- Library claims: 90 million+ tracks
- Web browser and mobile apps available
- Format: 16/44.1 FLAC

One of the longest-running services and one of only two to have competed in all of our *Group Tests*, Deezer is unchanged from last year – apart from switching the name of its HiFi option to Premium. Though other lossy tiers remain, this is the second most expensive service on a per-month basis, which is rather awkward as it is also the most limited. Unlike the other options here, Deezer is exclusively lossless. There is no hi-res content and neither has there been any indication that there will be.

But before we completely write Deezer off, there are some aspects of the service that are worthy of note. The 90 million figure quoted for library size is as abstract as the others, but very rarely draws a blank for me in searches. There's also a consistently good selection of curated content available, with playlists all the way from 'I just want something to listen to' to 'deep dive this genre'. There's excellent podcast and internet radio integration too. The star attraction, however, is the 'Flow' learning algorithm. The more you use Deezer, the better it gets at finding new things for you and, even with rivals making strenuous efforts in this direction, it's still a class act.

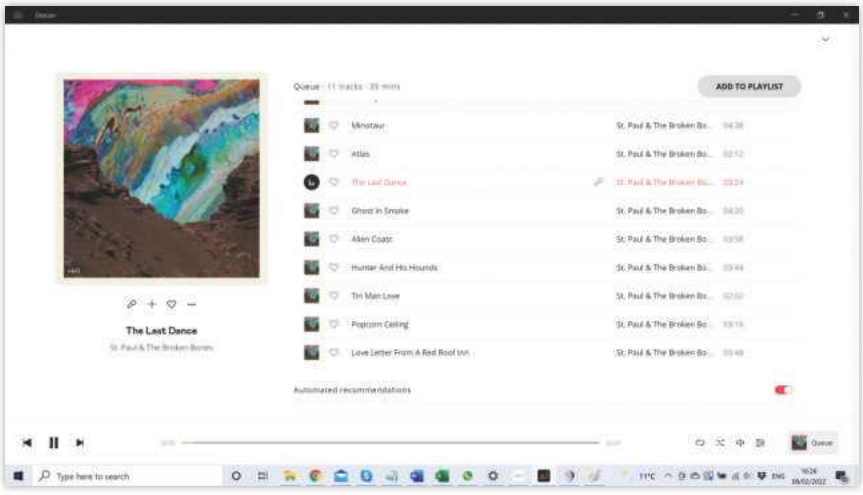
This know-how makes itself felt in other areas. Deezer's desktop and mobile apps are well laid out, easy to use and utterly bulletproof in stability terms. The Windows app has no USB audio management of its own, but thanks to Deezer operating at a single sample rate, it's much easier to set and leave the audio management software in Windows at 44.1kHz and be done with it. This is further backed up by some excellent third-party support too (see boxout).

Sound quality

A possibly contentious but – for me at least – repeatable phenomenon is that so long as the sample rate is set correctly (and it only needs to be set once remember), Deezer is largely competitive with a hi-res rival not being used in its direct setting. *Weight Of The World* is slightly less airy in its presentation, but the pristine Eighties nature of the mastering is well captured and Neil Young is very much the centre of attention, sounding believable in both scale and tone.

With both the Punch Brothers and John Williams pieces, Deezer has a slightly harder time of things, possibly because these seem to have been natively created as hi-res rather than remastered into it. *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald* is still a compelling listen, although some of the tiny details that other services extract from the hi-res content that give the supporting instruments their lifelike realism are slightly harder to make out here. With the *Jurassic Park* soundtrack there's also a perceivable reduction in the space around the orchestra that results in the performance feeling a little more congested even if the scale of the orchestra itself is largely unaffected.

Listening to *The Last Dance*, the smaller gap in resolution between high and low sample rates means that this is a fine performance. There's plenty of energy and a very commendable amount of bass heft too. This performance is closely matched with some tests on the iPad. Until comparatively recently the mobile apps were lossy only, but Deezer has now corrected this. As a result, the iOS app automatically selects the correct 44.1kHz sample rate and the results into the same hardware are effectively identical to the desktop app ●



PLAYS WITH OTHERS

As befits a service that has been around as long as Deezer has, one of its key strengths is that the level of third-party integration that it offers is extremely good. As well as cropping up in BluOS, it can be found working reliably with the streaming apps of a very wide selection of brands. This means you can realistically look to Deezer to handle a complete range of duties, from running on your phone, through to serious home listening. Playlists and favourites sync quickly across all different control points.

There are some other little added details that may appeal too. The family plan works for up to six individual members (all with separate log ins and accounts) across 13 devices, which is pretty generous as these deals go. It's also one of two services here (the other being Tidal) that works with the popular Waze mobile navigation app.

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
INTEGRATION	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★½
OVERALL	★★★★½

LIKE: Good apps and integration; sounds good; easy to use

DISLIKE: No hi-res; not the cheapest

WE SAY: Not the last word in sonic capability but as a flexible, strength-in-depth option, Deezer still delivers

High Res Audio
Streaming £79.99/six months

Also available for £199.99 a year, this specialist option delivers sparkling performance but there are limits

DETAILS

PROVIDER
High Res Audio

ORIGIN
Germany

TYPE
Desktop app streaming service

FEATURES
- Library claims: 750,000 albums
- Format: 24/44.1 to 192 FLAC

Completely different to all the other contenders in the test, rather than boasting of having millions of tracks High Res Audio instead quotes a more useful figure of "over 750,000 albums" (a massive increase on the 45,000 when we last ran this test). Every one of these is 24-bit/44.1kHz resolution or better; there's no lossless material, only hi-res. Furthermore, the vetting process HRA applies to its content is very stringent. Items flagged as 'hi-res' in other services are not present here because they don't meet the criteria.

Of course, this means HRA is not able to offer the breadth of content that other services can, but it does partner with an excellent online store that allows for the same material to be purchased. Stump up for a year's membership and you get a discount on store purchases too. If your view of streaming is to augment an ever-growing library of content you actually own, this is potentially useful, helped by a comparatively high percentage of new release material being available in hi-res.

The desktop app is a mixed bag. The software itself is good and has niceties like direct USB audio settings that means it will control the sample rate on the DAC without requiring human intervention and there is clear info as to what sample rate the file should be. What is less ideal is that throughout testing my antivirus software is convinced the app is malicious and has to be turned off. This is not ideal as the other options for listening to HRA remain somewhat limited (see boxout) – all of which places great emphasis on the app working as intended.

Sound quality

The performance margins between all the streaming services here is relatively narrow, but if your sole criteria relates to sound quality, HRA remains able to do things that the other services here cannot. The performance of *Weight Of The World* (here as 24-bit/192kHz) has a vibrancy to it that isn't really matched by any other service. Without affecting that distinctive mastering, Neil Young is fractionally more vivid and tangible in the context of the performance. He simply sounds more real.

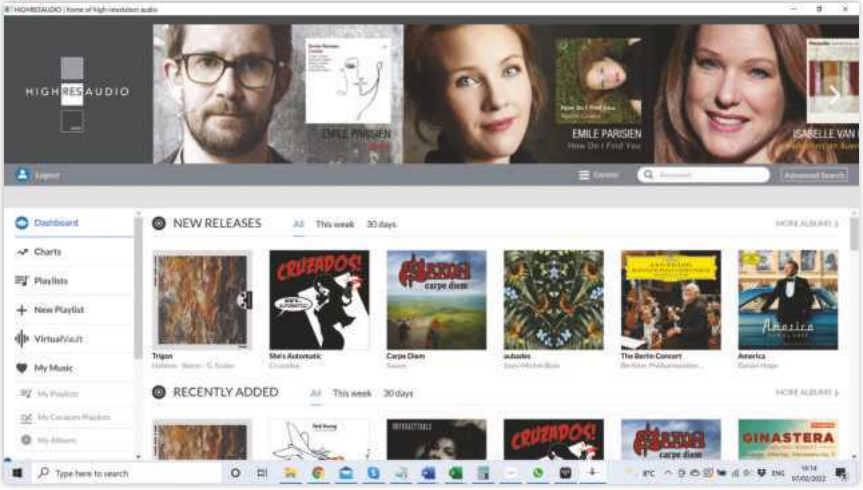
This same effect is writ large in the 24-bit/96kHz Punch Brothers too. Chris Thile is gorgeously recreated here and there are nuances to both his singing and the instrumentation around him that are easier to define than anywhere else. The growing scale of the track is effortlessly handled; even when it builds to a crescendo, it retains a space and airiness that can be harder to discern elsewhere. This same spaciousness is no less apparent with the John Williams recording. With the test being carried out on headphones, it's relatively easy to discern that whatever High Res Audio is doing (and this could be as simple as the level of compression being applied to the stream), more information is being pushed in front of you than with any other service.

The lower resolution version of *The Last Dance* (presented here as a 24-bit/44.1kHz master as elsewhere) is much closer to how it sounds on rival services. It remains potent and propulsive, with a real sense of drive and attack but there's nothing added by the HRA process in the way that the higher res content seems able to do. Additional listening suggests that this is typical of other 44.1 and 48kHz content. HRA is never inferior to rivals, but it can't always show a clear advantage ●

RESTRICTED MOBILITY

High Res Audio has done a very respectable job over the years of adding native support to a number of different manufacturers' control apps. This is a desirable combination as it offers the scope to feed your audio system with a very high-quality stream indeed. Furthermore, HRA has also worked to incorporate its download manager into relevant server software. When you buy the music you want, it heads straight to your server with no intervening transfer being needed.

This positivity has to be offset against the absence of a mobile app in any form. Such a feature has been listed as 'coming soon' for some years now, but has yet to arrive. Without it, any value consideration of HRA has to take into account that – if you also want streaming on the move – you'll need to pay for another service, which means that even at the reduced price it's still a costly option.



HI-FI Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
INTEGRATION	★★★★☆
FEATURES	★★★★☆
OVERALL	★★★★☆

LIKE: Can sound exceptional; desktop app and access to downloads

DISLIKE: No mobile app; stability issues

WE SAY: HRA can deliver sparkling performances, but it really is time for a mobile app

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Hi-Fi Choice GROUPTEST WINNER

Qobuz has hardly changed from last year, but then there's little that needs altering

DETAILS

PROVIDER
Qobuz

ORIGIN
France

TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service

FEATURES
- Library claims: 80 million+ tracks
- Web browser and mobile apps available
- Format: 16/44.1 to 24/192 FLAC

One of the earliest services to offer lossless content, Qobuz was equally prompt out the blocks with hi-res content too. As a result, it's possibly the streaming service that's changed the least over the last few years. The library is quoted at over 80 million tracks available in sample rates between 16-bit/44.1kHz and 24-bit/192kHz, all encoded to FLAC. Trackwise Qobuz sometimes draws blanks against Tidal, but there are certainly fewer than there were.

There are some useful details on offer here that are worthy of note. The first is that it has two streaming plans, both of which are hi-res capable but with one that adds a discount for content from the download store and a cheaper one that is streaming only. Qobuz has lopped a further £2 a month from this monthly price to keep it competitive as well as adding both a decent family plan and an interesting twin account subscription offer.

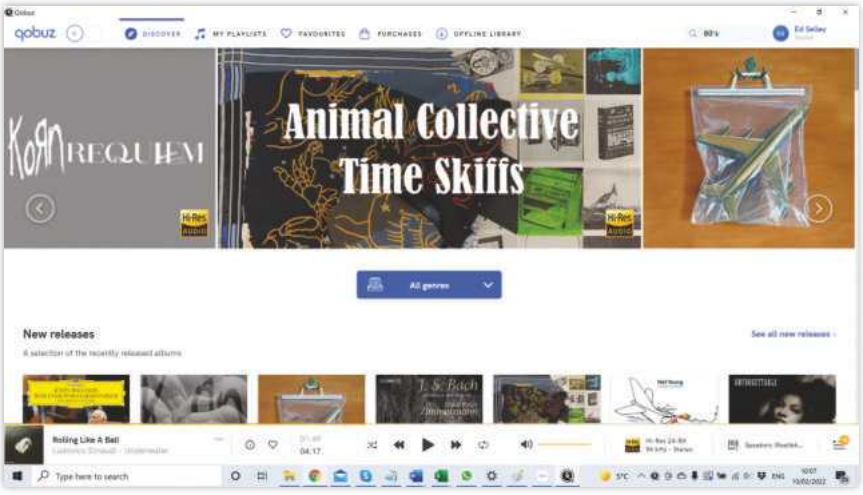
The desktop app is still an excellent example of its type. It's equipped with USB audio management for sample rate handling and backs this up with a superb search function and clear information about the sample rate material is available in. The curated content is extremely good too and Qobuz is by far the best of the six services at offering new release material. No less importantly, this is backed up by mobile apps and third-party support that are exceptionally comprehensive (see boxout). It might not be working on its own version of the 'Connect' option that Tidal offers, but its integration of Google Cast is brilliant if your equipment supports it.

Sound quality

Running via the Windows Desktop app, Qobuz realistically has to give a last nth of a percent in performance terms to High Res Audio, but the margins are close. *Weight Of The World* is available in 24-bit/192kHz and the performance is tonally accurate and maintains the slick period production while also ensuring that Neil Young is very much the star attraction. He's well defined against the music, even as the presentation gets congested towards the end and he has a believable sense of scale too.

The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald is available in 24-bit/96kHz and here Qobuz is competitive with everything else in the group. The way it combines extremely high levels of detail retrieval with superb tonality for both voices and instruments creates a performance that draws you in and even as it builds, there's no shortage of space to the recording – ensuring that it never sounds congested or constrained. With the sublime John Williams recording, here as a 24-bit/192kHz file, Qobuz doesn't manage to find quite the same level of airiness and three-dimensionality that High Res Audio does – but it's tonally rich, well detailed and atmospheric in a way that makes it an extremely vivid listening experience.

Interestingly, the manner in which *The Last Dance* is presented is – by a small margin admittedly – the best in the test. The 24-bit/44.1kHz master musters a feeling of drive and impact that ensures engagement without compromising on the tonal realism of Paul Janeway's vocals. Something that also warrants mention is that, if the test programme is rerun via the iPad Pro, the performance that Qobuz puts in is identical, suggesting that not only are there plenty of ways of enjoying it, but it should consistently deliver the goods across all of them ● ▶



STRENGTH IN DEPTH

Qobuz has clearly worked hard to ensure that it has widespread third-party app support. In terms of the test participants, it's a close second to Tidal in terms of the number of different third-party apps that support the service. Of course, unlike Tidal, if your device is 192kHz capable, everything that Qobuz streams is sent to it in a manner that it can decode, with no intervening MQA phase along the way.

The other star attraction that Qobuz offers is Roon integration. Along with Tidal, Roon can use Qobuz in such a way as to integrate your favourites from the service into your music library to form one single, easy-to-browse collection on which universal upsampling and DSP can be applied. It's an advantage that is very hard to ignore if you're a Roon user; particularly if you're not in possession of MQA-compatible hardware.

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★½
INTEGRATION	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★½

LIKE: Sounds good; playback software; useful online store

DISLIKE: No connect option; still some gaps in the library

WE SAY: Nails the real-world audiophile brief with a balance of great performance and functionality

OVERALL ★★★★★

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DETAILS

PROVIDER
Tidal

ORIGIN
Norway

TYPE
Desktop/mobile app streaming service

FEATURES
- Library claims: 80 million+ tracks
- Web browser and mobile apps available
- Format: 16/44.1 to 24/192 FLAC and MQA

Tidal has made some significant adjustments since we last ran this test. The fundamentals of its premium HiFi Plus tier are unchanged. It's still £19.99 a month, making Tidal the most expensive service here (there's no annual sub either) but a lossless HiFi tier has been added for £9.99 a month. Hi-res is exclusively encoded with MQA – the only service to do so. The library seems to have some content other services don't.

Tidal has really been on a charm offensive with third-party integration. This has always been good, but is now bolstered with the addition of Tidal Connect (see boxout) which sees it closest to the 'works-with-everything' ideal of Spotify. This has been combined with a serious bolstering of curated content too. Tidal now looks at your listening activities and creates a single daily and series of weekly playlists to bring new material to your attention. Using both fairly regularly, I think Deezer's Flow is better at this but Tidal's efforts are still impressive and augment some good general playlists.

The desktop and mobile apps have used the same basic interface for years, with tweaks and updates added to reflect the changes in overall functionality. The desktop app has the all-important USB management to ensure sample rates are correct too. It's mildly frustrating, therefore, that the same gripe I've had for some time shows no signs of being corrected. Tidal is the only service here (save for Deezer where there's only one sample rate) that doesn't show the sample rate of what's being played. This leaves it feeling slightly opaque in terms of what it offers and ensuring you are hearing what you should.

Sound quality

Last year, I noted that there were points in the listening programme where Tidal sounded different to any other service. This year, the decision to use MQA-compatible test hardware (so there is no 'unpack' on the app) is taken mainly to ensure this isn't down to issues around MQA, but there are still points where Tidal offers a different presentation to any other service. *Weight Of The World* is a 24-bit/192kHz stream and sounds propulsive and engaging, but the drumming is more dominant in the overall mix than anywhere else and it masks Neil Young's vocals slightly as a result.

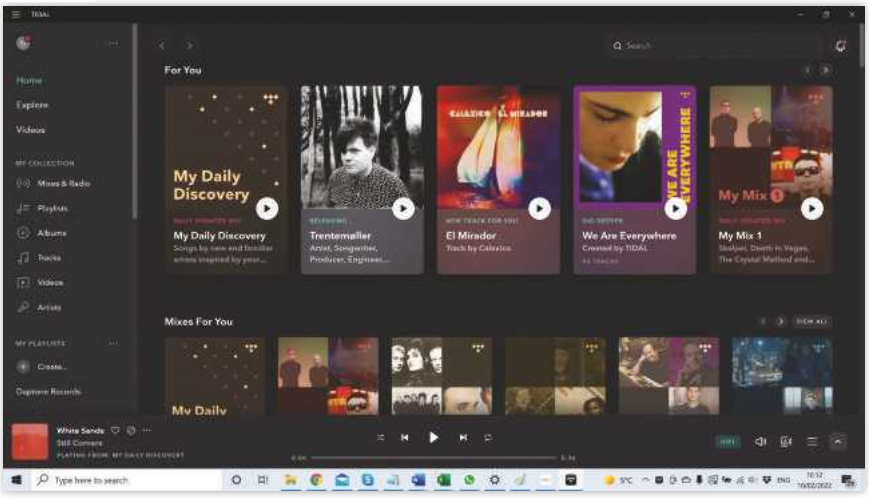
This is far less apparent on *The Wreck Of The Edmund Fitzgerald*. This is streamed as 24-bit/96kHz and it's similar to the performance put in by the other hi-res services. Instruments are tonally believable and tangibly real and there's no feeling of congestion or lack of space even as the piece reaches its crescendo. With the John Williams soundtrack there are again differences. It feels like there is differing emphasis to the 'normal' version (in this case 24-bit/192kHz) of the stream with cymbals and percussion more prominent in the mix. The feeling of space and levels of detail retrieval on offer are excellent, however.

Tidal springs a final surprise in that its version of *The Last Dance* is not a 24-bit stream (despite one being available and on offer from the other hi-res-capable services). The nature of this recording means that the presentation is not significantly different, though. Once again, there's a slight perception that the bass is more prominent than it is elsewhere, but it doesn't interfere with the overall engagement of the track or affect Paul Janeway's vocals ●

GET CONNECTED

Tidal's 'Connect' functionality is one of the most significant areas that the company has improved recently. The principle is the same as the Spotify service of the same name; open the app (and this can be desktop, Apple or Android), press the Connect icon and it will show compatible devices. Select one and Tidal plays through the app while retaining control on the app (which gives a more consistent operating experience). It has yet to achieve the ubiquity of Spotify, but it's still in advance of any other here.

This bolsters an already deeply comprehensive level of third-party support. Tidal has been working on this for years and it's reflected in the amount of different brands that support the service. Along with Qobuz, it's one of the two options for Roon users in terms of offering a single integrated library of your own material and streaming service favourites.



OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY	★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★☆
INTEGRATION	★★★★★
FEATURES	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★½

LIKE: Great apps; integration and library; solid performance

DISLIKE: Can sound different to other services; quite pricey

WE SAY: Impressively flexible, but some questions remain over the way it delivers some hi-res content

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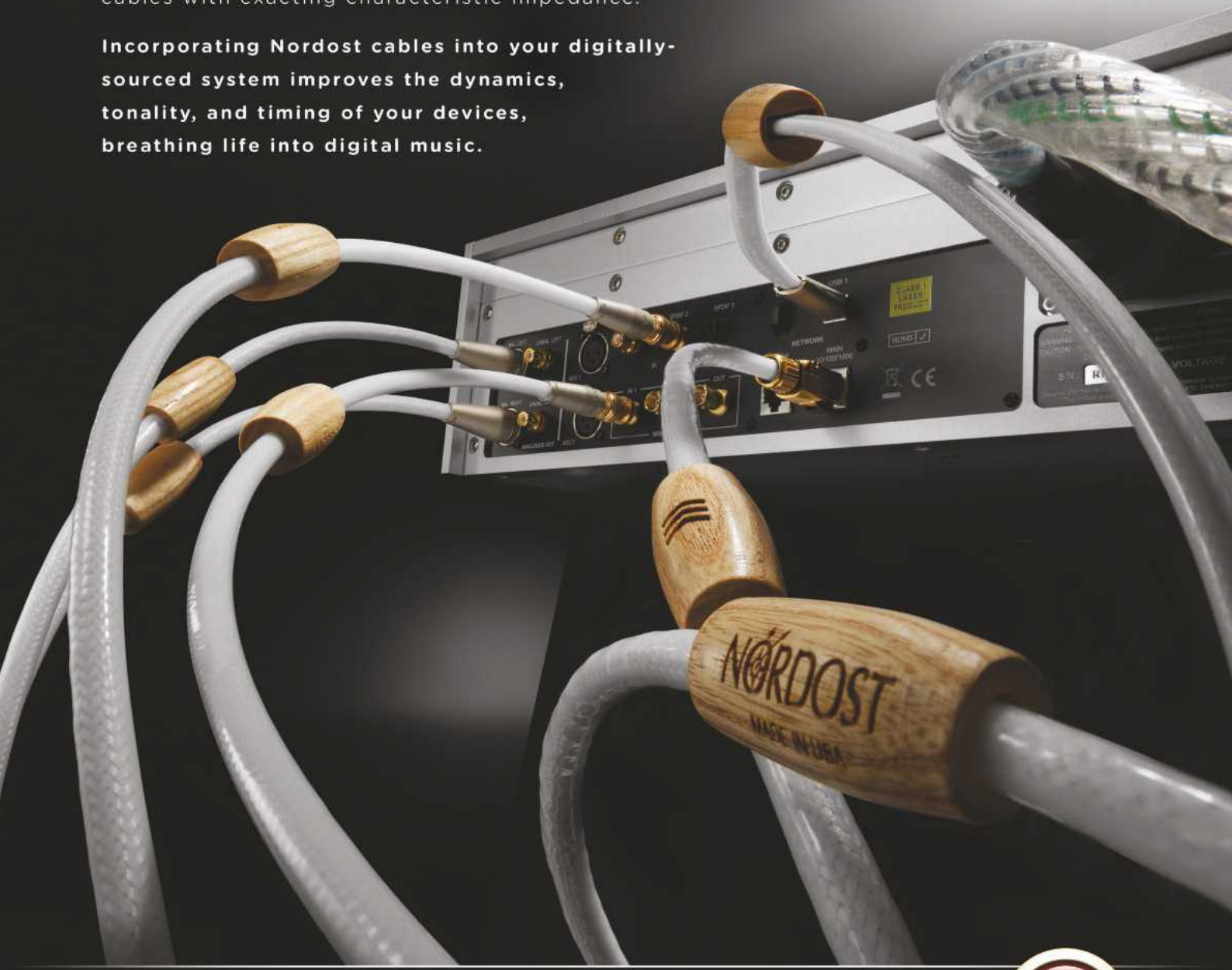

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Group test verdict

It's never been easier to listen to hi-res on demand, but who warrants your subscription? ***Ed Selley*** reveals all

TWO YEARS AGO, I placed Amazon Music second in the first test it participated in. Its position in last place reflects that it's the service least well adapted to enjoying bit-perfect hi-res – whether you're using mobile or desktop. It's cheap, but fundamentally flawed.

High Res Audio offers a superlative listening experience if you're willing to use it in the prescribed manner, but it's really time for a mobile app to allow it to be judged as an all-rounder in the manner that the other services are because, at the moment it cannot be seen as one.

Apple Music is not without its flaws; not least the fact that it refuses to deliver its full functionality for Windows users. The quality of its mobile app – on iOS platforms especially – means that it still has considerable appeal. The large library, excellent interface and competitive price are all very good indeed.

Deezer sneaks in ahead of Apple Music because its focus on a consistent experience across multiple platforms is very well executed. It's as accomplished at background playlists in the car as it is critical listening on your main system.

Tidal is much improved from last year. It offers a great library, available over a variety of different listening platforms and has gone to great lengths to bolster the curated content available. The result is a great streaming service to use but frustratingly, not always the best to listen to. It's hard to ignore that there are occasions where Tidal sounds different, not only to other streaming services but to purchased hi-res content from other sources. It's possible that everyone else is wrong and Tidal is right… but I'm not convinced that's the case.

WINNER

Qobuz keeps top spot. It's well priced, slick, easy to use and delivers exceptionally good sound quality across multiple platforms. The annual sub, family plans and online store sweeten the deal. The competition are closing the gap, but it still remains the one to beat.

Make/model	Amazon Music Unlimited	Apple Music	Deezer Premium	High Res Audio Streaming	Qobuz Studio Premier	Tidal HiFi Plus
Price	From £7.99/m	£9.99/m	£11.99/m	£79.99/six months	From £10.83/m	£19.99/m
Sound	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★½	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★½
Value	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★☆
Integration	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★★
Features	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★★
Overall	★★★★☆	★★★★☆	★★★★½	★★★★☆	★★★★★	★★★★½
	Well priced and full of likeable features, but sampling rate issues really rather let the side down	**Provided you remain in an Apple-focused environment Music is excellent, otherwise forget about it**	**Flexibility, great integration and good apps make the lack of hi-res almost forgivable. Almost...**	**Despite some stability issues HRA can sound superb, but it's high time it had a mobile app**	**Nails the audiophile brief with a supreme balance of great performance and decent functionality**	**Impressively flexible, but it can sound worryingly different to all of the other hi-res services**
Key features						
Annual sub	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Library format	FLAC	ALAC	FLAC	FLAC	FLAC	FLAC/MQA
Library size	90 million+ tracks	90 million+ tracks	90 million+ tracks	750,000 albums	80 million+ tracks	80 million+ tracks
Roon integration	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Mobile app	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

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4

5

6

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1 AVM Ovation A 6,2 Master Edition £8250
2 Luxman L-509X Class A/AB £9300
3 Hegel H390 with DAC £5000
4 Audio Analogue Puccini Anniversary £4000
5 AVM 30.3 Class A/AB £3000
6 Luxman L-550A XII Pure Class A £5800

info@audioconsultants.co.uk 4 Zephyr House Calleva Park Aldermaston Berkshire RG7 8JN UK

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Building on heritage

A decade on from the brand-defining M1 DAC, Bricasti has poured all its latter day experience into a dazzling new flagship

Bricasti Design is not one of those companies that adheres to the 'keep your range rolling' philosophy, seemingly launching updates to its products left, right and centre. Likely informed by its professional audio heritage, it keeps new arrivals to a rare minimum. So the launch of the M21, a flagship digital-to-analogue converter to replace the £9,600 M1 of 2011, is of real interest, particularly when you take into consideration the updates the Massachusetts-based company has implemented, and its somewhat breath-taking £17,250 price tag.

There are things that haven't changed all that much in the intervening 11 years, including the M21's choice of third-party chipset, which remains Analog Devices' AD1955 – a pair used in a dual mono configuration no less. And once again, the fully balanced circuit path includes separate, isolated power supplies for each channel.

Yet several additions mark this model out as a serious update on the M1, and help explain the significant leap in price. First, there's its native DSD decoding and separate 1-bit DAC, as seen recently on the company's more affordable (£7,000) M3 network DAC/headphone amp. This is described by Bricasti as a: "true one-bit modulator of our own design and unique to the industry". There is still the option of using the AD DAC for DSD conversion, of course, but it'll be converted to LPCM along the way.

For PCM sources, the M21 also introduces an alternative, bespoke ladder DAC option, which like the Analog Devices path can be used with linear and minimum phase filters, both offered in '0' and '1' flavours.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bricasti Design M21

ORIGIN
USA

TYPE
USB/network-attached DAC/streamer

WEIGHT
6.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 114 x 305mm

FEATURES
- 24-bit delta sigma; 20-bit ladder DAC; 1-bit DSD
- 3x user-selectable digital-to-analogue signal paths
- Balanced XLR outputs

DISTRIBUTOR
SCV Distribution

WEBSITE
bricasti.com
scvdistribution.co.uk

There's then something not mentioned in the otherwise comprehensive user guide, as it arrives via a firmware update: 'Wide' and 'Fine' options for the M21's Direct Digital Synthesis (DDS) clock recovery. So this new Bricasti model now combines three DAC topologies and four digital filters to tempt the audiophile, though they cannot all be 'mixed'.

The brand, which was founded back in 2004 by ex-Lexicon engineer Brian Zolner, currently has two product categories under its consumer umbrella: Classic and Platinum. The latter features iterations of its costlier

It only takes a few seconds to realise that the Bricasti M21 is a scintillating DAC

models, including the M20 preamp, M32 monoblock and M21 we have here, though the £3,000 price premium for a platinum-finished chassis and gold-plated buttons hardly makes it an impulse buy.

Even in the standard 'Classic' guise this DAC is lovingly built, with its sleek black case and silver top all machined from solid aluminium. Four circular stainless feet, from specialist Stillpoints, provide a vibration-nulling platform for the 6.8kg chassis.

Supplied with the M21 is a palm-sized, heavyweight remote

handset that offers six buttons: status, balance, input, level (Bricasti has added an analogue preamp stage) and up/down keys. This allows sofa-based browsing and control over the DAC's menu systems, and – as further evidence of Bricasti's build quality ethos – replaces a slip-off battery cover with a fancy new screw-backed panel.

If the M21's DAC and filter options seem generous the same can be said of its connectivity. The most prosaic is Toslink optical, supporting 96kHz, which is flanked by two 192kHz-capable S/PDIF coaxial connections, and an AES/EBU input supporting up to 192kHz and DSD64 over DoP. For computer/network setups, the M21 also has USB-B and Ethernet LAN sockets supporting 384kHz LPCM and DSD (DSD64 natively and DSD128 as DoP). There are also balanced XLR and unbalanced RCA outputs, plus a 12V trigger to sync with, for example, Bricasti's partnering power amplifiers.

Considering Bricasti's professional audio origins, it's not particularly surprising to find that the M21 falls a little way short of the user-friendly nature of some rivals. It's not overly complicated, thanks to a front-panel display with easy-to-read text and, once you've familiarised yourself with the way this can be navigated by the remote control, operation is for the most part plain sailing. However, there are some discrepancies between its front panel control and the handset – the Reference mode, which enables menu settings to be saved for instant recall, is only accessible via the M21's fascia, for example. Some might also wish for a custom app to complement the DAC's DLNA playback support.

Another unusual element concerns Bricasti's update path. Despite that Ethernet connection, software updates aren't handled over the air as you would perhaps expect. Instead, during the review period Bricasti supplies us with a physical memory card to be installed to flash the M21 to its latest iteration. Presumably such an upgrade is something that will be performed by your dealer, as it's far from a simple process.

Sound quality

Even though we have gradually grown accustomed to using the M21 over time, rather than getting to grips with it from the get-go, it still only takes a few seconds to realise it's a DAC with a scintillating performance when listening to it – one particularly suited to those who favour clarity and transparency and a laser-focus on soundstage separation. Does that mean it has a 'professional' sound? We wouldn't know, having spent little time in mastering suites, but we can certainly say we find it to be hugely entertaining in its ability to unearth seemingly every tiny detail of a multi-track mix while making it sound organic and musical.

Take, for instance, Aerosmith's *Last Child* in vanilla CD-quality FLAC. This choice cut from the Boston band's 1976 *Rocks* album begins with a dreamy, almost psychedelic mélange of ringing guitar and layered vocals. There's a lot more going on than meets the eye (or ear) and it sounds spine-tingling here, the cascade of information cleanly presented. Soon the track segues into a funky, rolling blues-rock jam, and what surprises is the way that the M21 delineates this without sacrificing any of its composure. A similar experience is to be had from The Rolling Stones' *Rocks Off* from the Deluxe edition of *Exile On Main Street,* another loose-limbed guitar piece that becomes, with the M21 in charge, a riot of detail, texture and separation.

In short, this DAC enables you to appreciate the skill of these rock and roll dinosaurs perhaps better than ever before. It really is that vivid, ▶

Several additions mark this model out as a serious update on Bricasti's M1

HOW IT COMPARES

With around £18k burning a hole in your pocket, the world of network-attached DAC/preamps is your digital oyster. The M21 is resolutely performance focused, with its choice of three onboard DACs, rather than tempting the enthusiast with a super-slick custom app. If the latter floats your boat then check out Naim's ND 555 network player (£16.5k or £25k with the 555 PSU) or the £15.7k Bartok and £20k Rossini DACs from dCS. This trio of Naim and dCS network DACs incorporates a lot of bespoke engineering from network platforms (Naim) through to custom DAC technologies (dCS), and all offer truly 'top drawer' sound that'll get to the very heart of your highest-res digital music files.

CONNECTIONS

1. Balanced XLR analogue output (right channel)
2. Unbalanced RCA analogue output (right channel)
3. RJ45 Ethernet network port
4. USB-B port
5. Optical digital input
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7. AES/EBU digital input (XLR)

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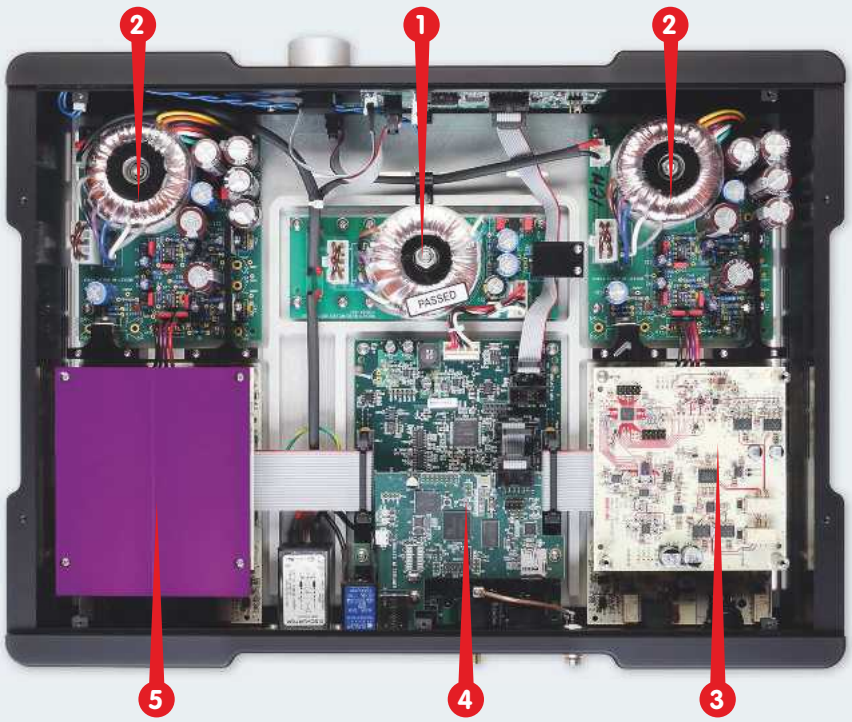

1. Power supply for the network audio, USB input and other digital processing
2. Left/right channel power supplies with separate regulation for the Analog Devices and custom DSD DACs
3. Screening removed (see 5) reveals Bricasti's own ladder and DSD DACs on the top PCB and AD1955 DACs on PCB below (left channel)
4. USB-B, S/PDIF and network audio processing
5. Purple-coloured alloy screening above DAC PCBs (right channel)

clear and precise, and has us settling in for the long-haul with a playlist of blues and country favourites. Bob Dylan's *Main Title Theme* from the *Pat Garrett And Billy The Kid* soundtrack, with its lilting, lullaby-style acoustic guitar and jingling bells, offers up a captivating fluidity. By contrast, the oddity that is the Ry Cooder/Rolling Stones/Nicky Hopkins collab *Edward's Thrump Up* off *Jamming With Edward!* lays on reverberant piano chords and a foot-tapping drum

Even the smallest details stand out in an impressively enjoyable whole

shuffle, proving the Bricasti M21's rhythmic, unmuddied talents.

Of course, audiophile owners of the M21 will likely be playing high-resolution files, if only because that price tag practically demands that you get the very best out of it. And, yes, even though its delivery of CD-quality is remarkable, it sings that little bit sweeter when the sample rates go up. Kim Andre Arnesen's *Magnificat IV,* played with jaw-dropping fluency by the Trondheimsolistene and mastered in DXD, has a gorgeous sense of scale and openness that easily describes the environment of the concert hall. The vocal here grows to include a mass of female voices, which soar high yet avoid sharpness. Moreover, the string accompaniment of this gentle, andante piece rises and falls with total grace.

Something with a bit more attack is Antonio Forcione's *Brasilico*, from *Meet Me In London*, which is all about the pauses between the notes and a complex image that sandwiches singer Sabina Sciubba between tabla drums and plucked acoustic guitar. All of this is revealed by the M21, together with a bite to its presentation and leading edges in particular that make the instruments sound utterly lifelike.

Of the M21's filter options, we quickly decide 'Linear' is our preferred choice as it seems to bring a little more focus to the DAC's delivery of midrange elements. Differences between the '0' and '1' options are pretty much indistinguishable to our ears, however, and nor can we really develop a preference between the Analogue Devices or bespoke ladder DAC options after much switching back and forth between the two.

This DAC doesn't only impress with its clear, airy highs and midrange texture. Always a constant throughout our extensive listening tests is an authoritative but never overtly rich bass. It renders the propulsive attack of the rhythm section of Led Zeppelin's *When The Levee Breaks* from *Untitled* aka *Led Zeppelin IV,* with tight focus while ensuring that John Bonham's muscular tub-thumping sounds every bit as heavy as ever, and brings low-end snarl to the ferocious album opener *Black Dog*.

Conclusion

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Doug MacLeod's *Serious Doin' Woman* from *Exactly Like This* suddenly becomes a listen that is nuanced and delicate in the extreme. There is a taut kick drum, gently struck snares and acoustic bass all sat back nicely from MacLeod's storytelling vocal.

It is a characteristically masterful presentation of the smallest of details as part of an impressively engaging and enjoyable whole. Miss experiencing it for yourself at your peril ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★½

LIKE: Exceptional build quality; triple DAC implementation

DISLIKE: Difficult update path

WE SAY: A proper premium product

OVERALL ★★★★½

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Go your own way

A new Roksan amp is rare, but Attessa also marks the start of a new piece of technology sharing. ***Ed Selley*** judges the results

Back in 2016, it made a lot of sense for Monitor Audio to buy the Roksan brand. For a company like MA, securing an up-and-running range of products that offered scope to partner its speakers made sense and gaining a well-respected brand name was logical too. For Roksan's part, the benefits of being taken over by a company with the resources of Monitor Audio gave scope for it to access technology and production processes that it would have struggled to achieve on its own.

The Attessa range features the first all-new products launched by Roksan since the takeover. The four- strong lineup includes a CD transport and turntable as well as two amplifiers, the more affordable of which combines digital and analogue inputs – although the more expensive of the two is the more interesting design. The Attessa Streaming Amp takes the same platform as the basic version, but adds on-board streaming and is equipped with the same BluOS interface that has underpinned NAD and Bluesound devices for a number of years. On a pragmatic level, it means that Roksan gains access to a comprehensive, stable and effective streaming platform that otherwise would have taken a huge amount of blood, sweat and tears to try and develop in-house. It also means that the Attessa will happily join a series of existing BluOS components. Like other BluOS devices, sample rate handling is limited to 24-bit/192kHz with no DSD support – but you do get MQA compatibility for both the streaming module and digital inputs.

The amplifier this module sits in is an interesting mix of traditional and more radical ideas. The amplifier itself is a Class AB design that delivers 80W into 8ohm, rising to 130W into 4ohm. There are two RCA line inputs; one of which has automatic input detection, joined by a moving-magnet phono stage. There are then four digital inputs; two optical and two coaxial, with decoding of these and the BluOS module undertaken by an unspecified Burr-Brown DAC. As well as the BluOS streaming, you get AirPlay and Bluetooth to complete the feature set. Output is via a single set of speaker terminals and a 3.5mm headphone socket.

The manner in which all of this functionality is accessed is interesting and usefully flexible. The BluOS app can select any input and control the volume as well as access your music library and on-demand content. For times when you don't want to fire up an app, Roksan has supplied a small remote handset. This is joined by front panel controls condensed into three buttons that will play, pause and skip tracks and a large, multi-function jog dial. This is both a volume control and – when pressed in and then rotated – an input selector, with the inputs themselves being shown via a row of illuminated icons. It works well in practice and keeps the front panel clean and unadorned. The slight catch with this lack of clutter is

The Streaming Amp is simple to use, well laid out and also extremely well-made

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Roksan Attessa Streaming Amplifier

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
Integrated amplifier

WEIGHT
10.5kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
432 x 76 x 373mm

FEATURES
- Quoted output power: 2x 80W (8ohm)
- Inputs: 2x stereo RCA inputs; MM phono stage
- Digital board: 2x optical; 2x coaxial; BluOS streaming; AirPlay

DISTRIBUTOR
Monitor Audio

TELEPHONE
01268 798900

WEBSITE
roksan.com

that there are limited opportunities to ensure that the Attessa truly looks like what we've come to expect from a Roksan product. With the exception of the cut-in lower edges, there's very little here that would have you automatically concluding what it is were the badges to be removed. The counter to this is that visual identity is realistically less important than effective ergonomics, and the Attessa definitely possesses that. It's simple

It's the sort of all-rounder you would happily place at the centre of a system

to use, well laid out and also extremely well-made.

Setting the Roksan up is every bit as straightforward as any other member of the Bluesound family although it is worth noting that, unlike a number of other BluOS-equipped devices, the Attessa must be powered on before the app can access the module. Once up and running, it feels as slick and stable as any other device so equipped. There are some detail aspects of BluOS that I'm not a huge fan of – mainly the queue system and the file cap for album art – but otherwise it's a fine platform to use.

Sound quality

This is not an especially bombastic amplifier and if you're looking for something that grabs you in the first 90 seconds, it might not fit the bill. Instead, it reveals an unflappable but encouragingly musical presentation that works well across a wide selection of content and feels extremely hard to unsettle. With Little Barrie and Malcolm Catto's magnificent *Quatermass Seven,* the Roksan possesses a flow with Catto's jazz drumming which is unforced and beguiling; doing justice to the album without overcooking it.

This is helped by admirable tonality too. The Roksan is consistent across all of its inputs and handles the sparse piano work of Poppy Ackroyd's *Pause* in a wholly convincing way. The piano has the necessary weight and presence to sound like a believable presence in the room and notes decay naturally, further aiding the suspension of disbelief. Vocals are also something that the Roksan handles well. The haunting quality of Martina Topley Bird's performance in *Forever I Wait* is well captured and she is easy to discern against her supporting instrumentation, but importantly never divorced from it.

HOW IT COMPARES

The Roksan offers a similar concept to the Cyrus ONE Cast (*HFC* 464) that makes use of Google's knowhow rather than BluOS. The Cyrus is almost as flexible as the Attessa although the experience of streaming music that you own is more pleasurable on the Roksan. The Cyrus has fewer inputs, but it does have an HDMI ARC. While the Roksan is slicker to use and better specified, the Cyrus is able to deliver a livelier performance with a wider selection of speakers. One area that the Attessa has a clear advantage is the supporting products in the range, which makes system building a great deal easier.

Something that will need to be considered with the Attessa is that it's sufficiently refined that a little care will need to be taken with speaker matching. Some testing takes place with the Fyne F500SP (*HFC* 486), which is also a supremely refined device, and the resulting combination is impressively composed but lacks a little bite and attack at times. Some brief tests with a veteran pair of Acoustic Energy AE1s are rather more potent and suggest that a speaker with a more forward balance will get the best results.

Do this and the Roksan does a fine job of being the sort of all-rounder you would happily place at the centre of a system. The phono stage is free from unwanted noise and has plenty of gain, ensuring that even the lower voltage that high-output moving-coil designs need shouldn't be a problem. AirPlay works seamlessly throughout and although I have a little trouble making an initial pair over Bluetooth with my Oppo smartphone, once done it re-connects each time. Absolutely crucial to how you perceive the Attessa is that it never feels like the BluOS module has been randomly bolted into a Roksan product. Instead, it's an absolutely integral part of how the Roksan functions and the result is impressively cohesive.

Conclusion

If forced to be unkind, I'd say the Attessa plays things a bit too safe. It's well specified, well made and utterly unflappable in use, but this has been achieved at the cost of it feeling slightly anodyne. A fairer appraisal might be that this new iteration of Roksan has avoided the quirks that can be superficially appealing but might grate over time. Where one person sees 'character' another will see flaws and the Attessa has been carefully designed to be supremely capable in this respect ●

HiFi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Refined, detailed and spacious sound; flexible specification

DISLIKE: Can sound overly smooth; lacks a little identity

WE SAY: It trades a little excitement for all-round competence, but sensibly partnered this is a very likeable amp

OVERALL ★★★★½

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twenty5.26*i* - Nov 20

twenty5.26*i* - Dec 20

Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

I on the prize

Better late than never, as B&W delivers its first true-wireless in-ears ***Cliff Joseph*** finds out if it's been worth the wait

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Bowers & Wilkins PI5

ORIGIN
UK/China

TYPE
True-wireless Bluetooth earbuds

WEIGHT
7g (earbud)
47g (case)

FEATURES
- 9.2mm driver
- Bluetooth 5.0 with SBC; AAC; aptX
- 4.5 hour battery + 20 hour from charging case

DISTRIBUTOR
Bowers & Wilkins

WEBSITE
bowerswilkins.com

B&W took its time creating its first true-wireless in-ears, but did so in order to avoid the compromises involved in combining high-quality sound with the convenience of wireless technology. That delay means that its PI5 and more expensive PI7 (*HFC* 478) are up against some stiff competition. But, like the company's more traditional PX range of headphones, they are smartly designed and reasonably priced.

Available in white or charcoal, the chunky earbuds have a large control button that protrudes quite noticeably from each ear. There are three sizes of tips provided to help get a good fit.

The solidly built earpieces house substantial 9.2mm drivers, with 10Hz-20kHz frequency response and two mics apiece to handle calls. AAC and aptX are supported for Bluetooth streaming and active noise cancelling is on hand to keep interruptions at bay. An ambient mode allows you to hear what's going on around you if you need to. Unfortunately, the button on the earpieces can only turn noise cancellation on or off, so you'll have to fish out your smartphone and use B&W's app to activate the ambient mode. There's no volume control on the earpieces either, which can be a bit irritating at times.

Battery life isn't great either, rated at a modest 4.5 hours from a single charge. The carry case provides an additional 20 hours of power for longer journeys. It supports wireless charging too.

Sound quality

I'm intrigued by the claimed low-end 10Hz frequency response and am not disappointed by the way the earbuds deliver the slinky bass guitar on Leonard Cohen's *You Want It Darker*. It's a deep, firm sound – taut enough to hear the gentle snap of the strings – but it still feels loose and relaxed. And, of course, there's Cohen's famous basso profundo rumble, which is wonderfully rich and full, yet still manages to sound light and playful as he mocks his own angst-ridden image: "I struggled with some demons, they were middle class and tame".

After the darkness of Cohen, I turn to the light of Thomas Tallis' *Spem In Alium*, performed by the Pro Cantione Antiqua choir. There is a gossamer lightness to the tones of the opening voices and the earbuds are able to create an attractive sense of space that allows the eight groups of five voices to weave around each other as they float through the air. I'm also pleased to note that turning on the noise cancellation doesn't appear to affect the sound quality, even on a piece as delicate as this. It's effective too, blocking out most of the background noise around me – including a nearby lawn mower – although a little high-frequency chatter from the BBC News on TV still manages to get through.

After the serene delicacy of Tallis, I decide to liven things up with the Muse wall of sound on *Knights Of Cydonia*. The clear, balanced performance of the PI5 copes well as the band chucks everything at the wall. The opening burst of Queenly harmonies sounds suitably crisp and dramatic and sets the scene as the galloping-horses drum beat charges forward. The mariachi horns can easily get lost in the mix, but the PI5 lets them float above the drums and guitar, evoking the spirit of a Sergio Leone spaghetti western. My only complaint as the song hurtles into its headbanging finale is that a little more raw power wouldn't go amiss.

Conclusion

The B&W might not be the best option for rock or dance music, then, and arriving so late in the day means that it's up against a lot of decent competition. But if clarity and well-balanced sound across all frequencies are what you're looking for then the PI5 will be a good option for calmer moments of music ●

Hi-Fi Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★☆
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★½☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★½☆
OVERALL ★★★★☆

LIKE: Well-balanced sound with firm bass

DISLIKE: Modest battery life; slightly clumsy controls

WE SAY: Coming late to a crowded market, but still worth a hearing

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Hi-Fi Choice RECOMMENDED

Play time

A new portable audio player is a rare thing to encounter these days, so ***Ed Selley*** enjoys getting to grips with the DTR1+

Portable audio players have settled into a niche role after having been squeezed by smartphones and portable DACs for more serious use. The Prelude DTR1+ is built by Dethonray; a China-based company that produces a small range of electronics and earphones.

The DTR1+ uses a Linux-based operating system called Ocelot (not Android), intended to read stored content from a micro SD card – up to 1TB is supported. There is no internal memory beyond that required to run the playback software. In turn, there are no apps for streaming services or wireless connectivity.

The good news is that it is fairly unconcerned about what format you store the files in. The DTR1+ supports every routinely encountered lossless and hi-res format and sample rates up to 32-bit/192kHz. This includes DSD64 and 128, but it's important to ensure the SD card you're using has a higher class rating – as I experience some stuttering with a lower speed card. Decoding is handled by an AKM AK 4490EQ chip and made available to two 3.5mm outputs – one fixed, the other variable.

Something relatively unusual about the DTR1+ is the operating voltage which is 8.4V rather than USB's 5V. This requires a special charging block, but Dethonray says the benefits to the separate analogue and digital sections are considerable. All this is enclosed in a well-made compact metal chassis with a retro futuristic character. There are some limitations, however. Compared with the fullscreen technicolour of Astell&Kern devices, this compact and fairly lo-res display feels a little old fashioned.

Sound quality

The DTR1+ might not be the most sophisticated platform going, but its performance is rather good. The most immediately noticeable aspect is that it has enough power to ensure that even full-size headphones like Focal's Clear MG and Meze Audio's LIRIC can be driven convincingly without too much gain or unwanted noise when you switch to a more sensitive IEM.

And it is with IEMs that I find the DTR1+ makes most sense because the small combined size of it and Sennheiser's IE800 S (*HFC* 434) is genuinely portable. It makes for an impressive performer too, with Ray LaMontagne's *Three More Days* being energetic and propulsive while still delivering convincing tonality and an excellent level of refinement. Towards the end of the track when a solo flute performs, it has a pleasing immediacy without any hard edge.

A 24-bit/96kHz download of Craig Armstrong's *It's Nearly Tomorrow* is rich, spacious and engaging with a more than respectable open and three-dimensional soundstage. The limitations, generally concern the bass output. The 24/96 download of *Barbara, Barbara, We Face A Shining Future* by Underworld has prodigious low end but there's a sense that the DTR1+ pulls its punches slightly. The bass is detailed and articulate but other digital options for the same sort of price deliver more weight and heft. This isn't solely the preserve of heavy electronica either; the weight of *The Gravedigger's Song* by the Mark Lanegan Band isn't so readily apparent, although once again, the track positively flies along.

If you can live with this or possess a pair of headphones or earphones that benefit from being slightly reined in, the DTR1+ does a fine job of working with a wide selection of music and making sense of all of it. That fluency and cohesion is equally useful regardless of whether you're picking through a delicate Imogen Heap solo vocal or hammering through some early Kings of Leon material.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Dethonray Prelude DTR1+

ORIGIN
China

TYPE
32-bit/192kHz & DSD-capable Digital Audio Player

WEIGHT
160g

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
100 x 57 x 19mm

FEATURES
- AKM 4490 DAC
- Quoted battery life: 8 hours
- MicroSD slot (1TB max)

DISTRIBUTOR
VAL HiFi

WEBSITE
dethonray.com

Conclusion

So long as you own your own content, the DTR1+ is a well-engineered and very musical player that could well be the portable audio solution that you're looking for ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★☆

LIKE: Rhythmic and engaging performance; decent tonality; build

DISLIKE: Basic and limiting operating system; lack of bass

WE SAY: An interesting and engagingly musical DAP that works well with a wide selection of different material

OVERALL ★★★★½

iFi

ZEN Stream
Wi-Fi audio transport

ZEN CAN
Headphone amp

ZEN DAC V2
USB DAC and headphone amp

ZEN Phono
MM/MC phono stage

ZEN Blue V2
Bluetooth DAC

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2020 — BEST DAC £100-£200 — iFi Zen DAC

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ — iFi ZEN CAN — March 2021

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ — iFi ZEN DAC V2 — 09/2021

WHAT HI-FI? ★★★★★ — iFi ZEN Blue — April 2020

hi-fi+ HIGHLY COMMENDED 2020

HI-FI WORLD

HOME CINEMA Choice — BEST BUY

EISA AWARD — Best Product 2020-2021 — BEST VALUE DAC — iFi Audio ZEN DAC

Hi-Fi Choice ★★★★★

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avforums BEST IN CLASS AWARD 2021 — iFi Audio ZEN Phono

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DETAILS

PRODUCT
Astell&Kern AK Zero1

ORIGIN
South Korea/Japan

TYPE
Wired in-ear monitors

WEIGHT
35g

FEATURES
- 5.6mm dynamic, balanced armature, micro-planar dynamic drivers
- 1.25m braided OFC cable (3.5mm)

DISTRIBUTOR
Astell&Kern

WEBSITE
astellkern.co.uk

Loose fit

A&K's three-driver design produces impressive sound quality. ***Cliff Joseph*** throws himself in

A&K is well-known for its range of high-quality digital audio players, but the company also makes a number of earbud options (although it prefers the term 'in-ear monitors'). Generally, its UK range is pretty pricey, varying from £1,000 to £3,000. The AK Zero1 is an attempt to produce a more affordable option.

It boasts some pretty impressive engineering, with a 'hybrid' design combining three different types of driver. The lower end of the frequency scale is handled by a conventional 5.6mm dynamic driver, which is combined with dual-balanced armature drivers to provide clear vocals and treble. The Zero1 then goes one step further by adding a 'micro-planar' driver to further enhance higher frequencies, giving a quoted 25Hz-30kHz frequency response. The drivers are precisely positioned within an acoustic chamber and housed inside an aluminium casing designed to reduce vibration and distortion.

The Zero1 is purely a wired headphone and includes a sturdy 1.25m braided OFC cable with MMCX connectors, which can be detached if required. There's a standard 3.5mm connector, but A&K also sells an optional 4.4mm cable for £119. Silicon buds are included in five different sizes, along with a set of memory foam eartips. However, the skimpy manual doesn't make it clear how to fit or wear the earbuds and the website isn't much more help. In fact, it is only after finding some photos on the US website that I realise I'm wearing them upside down!

Sound quality

The multi-driver design really delivers the goods. The electronic bass on The Orb's *Prime Evil* is deep and ominous, but with a taut, sinuous rhythm that helps drive the track forward. The bass isn't exaggerated, however, and doesn't overwhelm the lighter percussion effects above it. The Zero1 can handle deep emotion too, and the double bass that introduces Górecki's *Symphony Of Sorrowful Songs* has a deep, mournful sound. The A&K also displays a finely balanced sound as the lighter strings of the Polish Radio Symphony join in, heightening the emotion and preparing the way for Beth Gibbons' solo. The tremulous sound of the ex-Portishead singer's voice is heart breaking and the Zero1 effectively captures the spacious resonance of the concert hall.

This vocal expertise continues as I switch to the far more angelic sound of Thomas Tallis' *Spem In Alium*. The multi-layered choral harmonies of *Pro Cantione Antiqua* are wonderfully clear and precise, and the in-ear is again able to create a great sense of space as the intertwining voices of the choir soar and appear to take flight. The vast crescendo at the halfway mark is a real challenge, with all 40 voices simultaneously reaching for the heavens, but the Astell&Kern retains control and is able to stand back and create a space that allows each voice to be clearly heard.

As a timely farewell (at the time of writing at least) to the mighty Meat Loaf – and, of course, his key songwriter, Jim Steinman – I listen to his epic ballad *I Would Do Anything For Love*. Very much like his life, his voice is a thing of extremes and the multi-driver in-ear is able to capture the full range of his vocal expression – going from soft and warm to sharp and loud within a single line.

Conclusion

The only real concern I have is that the higher frequencies of the Zero1 can start to become a little on the harsh side if the eartips are in any way loosened inside the ear canals. Of course, all earbuds require a firm seal to achieve the best possible performance, but this is something that seems particularly important here. For that reason alone, it's well worth trying the earbuds for size in a showroom before buying if possible ●

HI-FI Choice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★☆☆

LIKE: Firm, powerful bass; clear, precise vocals; impressive sense of space

DISLIKE: Chunky earpieces; fiddly to fit

WE SAY: Great sound quality, but getting a good fit is crucial

OVERALL ★★★★☆

One vision

Rega's all-in-one starter system is radically different to anything else, but ***Ed Selley*** thinks that the result is rather brilliant

One of the most important aspects of having a successful range of products for any company is making sure that the 'first rung' – the point at which a customer might begin their relationship with you – is a compelling one. Different companies have different approaches to this, but the common theme is to try and embody what you stand for in miniature. For Rega, this is trickier than it might at first appear. The company offers complete hi-fi systems; produced in the UK, usually vinyl-fronted and from separate components. Any attempt at a first rung has to embody these values to have any relevance to the rest of the model range. The answer to this conundrum is the System One; a complete hi-fi in a box for £1,200.

The components that make up the System One are not all new. The Planar 1 (which we tested in 'Plus' configuration with on-board phono stage in *HFC* 434) and the io integrated amplifier (*HFC* 464) have been part of the existing range of products for some time. In miniature, both of them embody Rega's design priorities as seen in the rest of the range. The Planar 1 turntable is an unsuspended, belt-driven design that adheres to Rega's ideals of low overall mass combined with high rigidity.

In order to reduce the price, some features seen on the more ornate turntables like the stiffening brace and glass platter have to fall by the wayside. The platter is instead made of phenolic resin and the plinth on its own provides the necessary stiffness. The RB110 tonearm is recognisably related to the designs on the larger models, but simplified with the antiskate fixed to work optimally with the Carbon cartridge that comes pre-fitted.

As well as reducing the cost and complexity of the turntable itself, it means that the Planar 1 is also about as simple as a turntable can be to get up and running. The belt acts on a sub-platter and comes pre-fitted and there is a rubber washer on the arm stub that pretty closely approximates to a 2g tracking weight. It's hard to envisage any turntable making the process much easier and once you've got it set up and ready to go, the Planar 1 is painless to use.

The variant used in the System 1 is not the 'Plus' because the io has its own internal phono stage. Indeed, in miniature, the io comprises all the features that characterise Rega amplifiers. It is a class A/B-based design delivering 30W into 8ohm. Three inputs are fitted, one being the phono stage, plus a 3.5mm headphone socket. There's no minimalism at work here either; the specification includes a full remote control, which makes the io extremely easy to use. The compact chassis is all metal and mimics the same styling as the bigger amplifiers. Perhaps the most unheralded part of this is that, despite its small size, the io never feels toylike in use.

The newest member of the trio and also the most radical of the three is the Kyte standmount speaker. Where the Planar 1 and io are simplified versions of more expensive products, the Kyte is genuinely different. The reason for this is that the MDF cabinets used in other Rega speakers cannot be produced at £500. This has led Rega to construct the Kyte from the same phenolic resin that forms the Planar 1 platter. Each cabinet is a

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Rega System One

ORIGIN
UK

TYPE
All-in-one system

WEIGHT
4.2kg (turntable)
2.9kg (amp)
3.7kg each (speakers)

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
447 x 117 x 360mm (turntable)
180 x 68 x 290mm (amp)
325 x 188 x 232mm (speakers)

FEATURES
- 30W per channel
- RB110 tonearm with automatic bias adjustment
- 125mm doped paper mid/bass and ZRR tweeter

DISTRIBUTOR
Rega Research Ltd.

TELEPHONE
01702 333071

WEBSITE
rega.co.uk

single-piece moulding (hence the tapered sides to simplify extracting it from the mould) with a composite wooden front baffle mounting the drivers on the front. To stiffen the cabinet, a cruciform brace is fitted that has ceramic plates (made of the same ceramic as the Planar 10 platter) on the ends. As the taper would mean the speaker angles back on a flat surface, a foot (also made of phenolic) attaches to the rear to offset the angle.

The drivers in the Kyte are lifted from the RX1 (*HFC* 417) and comprise a 125mm doped paper mid/bass and a ZRR soft dome tweeter. Around the back you'll find a single pair of speaker terminals and a small bass port. Quoted measurements are an impedance of 6ohm and sensitivity of 89dB/W. As it's made of different materials to other Rega speakers (and everyone else's in fairness), you'd imagine that the Kyte might struggle to feel like a Rega design but in the flesh it really doesn't. There's the same sense of purposeful minimalism as the other components, which is typical of the company.

All this turns up in a single large box with the required cabling to get it up and running. You might legitimately ask: "what about digital?" but this is not Rega's primary focus and the two inputs on the io leave you space to choose the options that work for you. Getting the System One up and running is simplicity itself; if you're reading this as a manufacturer of a streaming system, you need to be confident that your wireless setup is very good indeed before you think it might be faster.

Sound quality

Once you're up and running and listening to records, it's important to put the System One in a degree of context. A £1,300 Naim Mu-so 2nd generation (*HFC* 452) will go as loud as the Rega and probably matches it for bass extension too. There's no automatic on-paper advantage to the Rega being three different products, but the manner in which it performs is meaningfully different.

Listening to the re-pressed *What Does Anything Mean? Basically* by The Chameleons on the System One is a demonstration of effortless musicality. The euphoria that underpins *Perfume Garden* is absolutely stitched into the presentation. The Planar 1 might be the simplest expression of a Rega turntable going, but it still flows and times like a Rega should. John Lever's magnificent drumming is picosecond perfect and the result is so effortlessly rhythmic that it's almost impossible to sit in front of the System One as a disinterested observer. This is not a device for background music.

The relationship between the Planar 1 and io approaches symbiotic. Both products are capable of unfailingly convincing tonality in a way that stems from the absence of DSPs or other wizardry being at work at any stage. Stay within the io's surprisingly wide operating envelope and it simply sounds effortless. Even the potent and heavy hitting *Caged Bird/Imitations Of Life* by the Cinematic Orchestra convinces here. Roots Manuva is older and wiser than he was in his earlier work with the group and that's reflected in the performance. The massed instruments behind him are cohesive, but have individual character and there's no shortage of space in which they perform.

The Kytes are instrumental in this too. The simple expedient of being able to place them a meaningful distance apart from one another is part of the reason why they can produce an excellent soundstage, but there's more to them than that. The integration between the two drivers is utterly seamless and it lends the speakers a tremendously enjoyable fluency and cohesion. The camp but glorious acid jazz of Corduroy's *High Havoc* is an absolute riot from start to finish. The title track hammers along without hindering the (surprisingly high) production values and the Kytes prove to be impressively hard to provoke. As noted, the bass that's on offer here isn't seismic, but it's tuneful and well integrated into the overall frequency response.

The System One is a joyous introduction to what Rega offers as a company

Rega's System One balances affordability with real-world functionality

The io integrated sounds effortless throughout testing

No less important listening to the System One as a whole is that the demands it makes on the listener to allow for suspension of disbelief are extremely low. Surface noise is minimal and the Carbon cartridge seems forgiving of worn pressings too. The phono stage of the io is quiet and has plenty of gain, which ensures you're never short of volume. It would be relatively straightforward to extract more performance from the Planar 1, but what really surprises me is just how little desire I have to do that based on its out-of-the-box performance.

It has to be said, though, when it does come to plotting an upgrade path, the System One starts to make most one-box options look decidedly limited. Obviously, the Planar 1 can have its cartridge and isolation tinkered with, but the io and Kytes are good enough that you could sell them and put the money towards a Planar 3 (*HFC* 405) and the other components would reflect the improvement. In fact, I'll stick my neck out and say that any component of the three could be changed for one costing up to a grand and the other

The Planar 1 is about as simple as a turntable can be to get up and running

two unchanged components would be able to benefit from the gains in performance. Where rivals offer you a taste of what they do as an opener, Rega provides you with the means of proceeding from the System One to its flagship components in smart, single, linear steps.

In some ways, this is simply a bonus rather than the compelling reason to buy the System One because the fundamentals of what the Rega offers are so addictive. For many owners, this is going to be their first taste of a true separates system and the bar that this trio sets in terms of working with each other to produce something meaningfully better than the sum of its already impressive parts is a very high one. In the time I use it, the Rega rekindles some of the magic of my first systems; manifestly inferior to what I have now, but special because of the leap in performance that they offered at the time.

HOW IT COMPARES

No other company is able to build a tip-of-the-stylus to cone-of-the-driver system in-house until you get to AVID or Audio Note UK who occupy a rather different price point. Pro-Ject gets close if we let it off the speaker cable and a system of T1 Phono Turntable, Box S S2 BT integrated amp and Speaker Box Design 5 speakers will result in something similar to the System One at a lower price. However, there is no remote on the amp, fewer inputs and less power. It shows just how cleverly the System One balances affordability with real-world functionality.

Conclusion

Whether you approach the System One with your heart or your head, it's hard not to admire what Rega has achieved here. This is both a credible alternative to more conventional single-chassis all-in-one systems and a joyous introduction to what Rega offers as a company. It's mightily impressive both in execution and performance and I'm completely smitten by it. If you're looking for one of the purest distillations of the hi-fi experience on the market today, you've just found it ●

Hi-FiChoice

OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★★

BUILD QUALITY ★★★★★

FEATURES ★★★★★

LIKE: Sparkling performance; easy to set up and use; scope for future upgrades

DISLIKE: No digital connections

WE SAY: Brings the Rega experience to a new price in a wholly straightforward and enjoyable way

OVERALL ★★★★★

- STORES NATIONWIDE
- DEMONSTRATION ROOMS
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iFi Audio
ZEN One Signature · £349

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This 200W streaming amplifier features Purifi's Ultra-Quiet Amplification Technology, BluOS multi-room streaming, a 32-bit DAC, full MQA decoding and Dirac room correction.

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naim

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Wharfedale's new EVO4.4 has grown out of the extensive research and development that produced the ELYSIAN flagship loudspeakers and borrows much of the technology involved in ELYSIAN.

£1199

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021 BEST FLOORSTANDING SPEAKER £1000-£1500 Wharfedale Evo 4.4

Q ACOUSTICS • 3030i

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KEF

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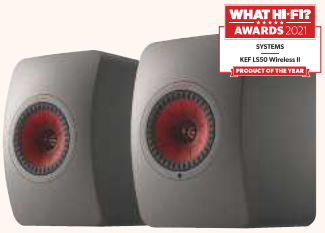

WHAT HI-FI? AWARDS 2021 SYSTEMS KEF LS50 Wireless II PRODUCT OF THE YEAR

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naim

MU-SO Qb (2ND GEN)
Wireless Speaker
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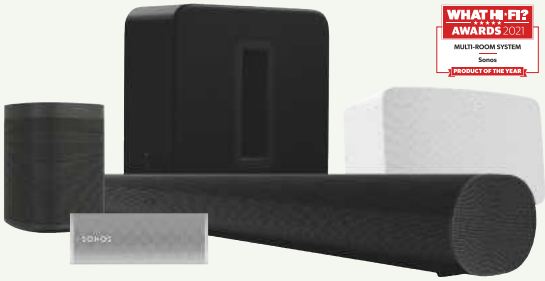

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HORNS OF plenty

Remember Nipper The Dog? ***James Stevens*** explains the history and abiding appeal of the horn loudspeaker

I'm not joking when I tell you this, but I've had customers tear up on first listening." This is how John Bryant of Loudspeaker Design and Restoration introduces me to the world of horn loudspeakers. Emotional stuff, eh? Yet, apart from PA systems, in vintage shops or the occasional DIY enthusiast setup, horns are not often seen or heard. They were common in domestic hi-fis during the early and middle parts of the 20th century as in the pioneering days of mechanical sound reproduction the vibrating diaphragm connected to the needle of the phonograph was of such low power that the only way to get anything audible was via a horn speaker – think Nipper The Dog and His Master's Voice. Unfortunately, the acoustic understanding embedded in early horns limited their reproduction of bass frequencies, and consequently sounded very tinny.

Between the two world wars, engineers developed an improved solution for reproduction of music (the electrical amplifier) along with the motorised turntable, but still struggled to deliver high power so horn loudspeakers remained in use. It was found that a curved and flared bell precisely matched to the frequency range it was attempting to reproduce was the optimal solution, with horns of various sizes needed to accommodate different parts of the frequency response across the audio spectrum. The problem remained in the critical, expensive and complex task of getting the correct curve of each horn. And fitting the longer horns needed to reproduce bass notes even into furniture-sized cabinets required considerable ingenuity to 'fold' the speaker into the space.

As available amplifier power increased, simpler conic drivers of the type now seen on most loudspeaker units were adopted as the most cost-effective solution for the majority of users. They are more forgiving than horns outside their core frequency range and less directional in their responses, hence most manufacturers continue to design loudspeaker cabinets containing multiple cone drivers.

Dr Adam Hill, Associate Professor of Electroacoustics at the University of Derby, is clear why dynamic cone loudspeakers are more prevalent today than horn-loaded

A good horn speaker is detailed, sweet and clear, with an effortless energy and presence

devices. "Neville Thiele and Richard Small revolutionised the loudspeaker industry in the Sixties with a set of parameters for loudspeaker design based on a small signal equivalent electrical model of the system. This allowed for precise engineering of dynamic cone loudspeakers, achieving the desired response in a relatively small package, as compared with a horn-loaded loudspeaker.

"One of the primary issues with dynamic cone loudspeakers is the impedance mismatch between the drive unit and the air. This is the major limiting factor in such units' efficiency. With horns, on the other hand, sound energy enters the narrow throat of the horn at high pressure and low volume velocity. As the sound wave reaches the larger mouth of the horn, the energy has expanded over a wider cross-sectional area and the pressure, therefore, will be lower, with a resulting higher volume velocity. This provides a better impedance match with the air in the room, allowing for maximal transfer of energy into the space and minimal energy reflected back into the horn. Of course, this efficient transfer of energy all comes down to proper horn design, which is quite often easier said than done."

Round the horn

A mainstream speaker may be 0.5 percent efficient, which is why it needs a high-powered amp to drive it. A typical PA is a few percent efficient at best. But horn speakers can achieve 50 percent efficiency. Ben Cemlyn of Wivenhoe Horn Speakers picks up the thread: "It's easy to make a bad horn. Echoey from structural resonance, a

Matching a horn to the listening room requires careful measurements and optimisation

strong frequency peak and poor integration with other parts of the system."

So it's obvious why most manufacturers have steered clear of the technology?

"I've focused on the Tractrix horn – a profile which is essentially exponential at the narrow end, giving high efficiency, but which expands to finish at 90° to the horn axis at the mouth," says Cemlyn. "I add a roll-over as it creates a natural, smooth transition of the wavefront to the air in your listening room, minimising reflections back into the horn – a major issue for purely exponential horns and a main cause of horns sounding bad. Tractrix plus roll-over often gives better mating to free space than a cabinet – which will have reflections from the edges. So, a well-designed Tractrix horn speaker can give high-efficiency, wide bandwidth and a pure, natural and open sound."

Bryant also notes the problems cabinets can cause: "I've worked on eliminating cabinets as a source of distortion to the sound. As with all engineering choices, having speakers mounted in an open frame can cause problems: loudspeakers look less like furniture and more 'technological' – the guts are on show."

Better shape up

The Tractrix shape is popular among niche producers, but other designs have found favour. Bryant prefers the Le Cléac'h shape for a horn system. "They're like the Tractrix design, although I reckon they're more effective in reducing higher order modes. I also use simpler waveguides for my tweeters, which are like horns at the throat but shallower overall, more like a saucer. The waveguide increases tweeter sensitivity, which means reduced distortion and its profile (typically an oblate spheroid) radiates with more directivity, which delivers improved in-room performance."

Cemlyn and Bryant are examples of a new spirit of adventure in the UK loudspeaker market that have brought horn technology within the reach of the ordinary hi-fi aficionado. This generation of designers and manufacturers has matched great sound with achievable price points. "It's all about attention to detail," says Bryant. "I design individual horns with the client in mind. You have to consider the type of listening you are building for. You have to think about the size of the room and amplifier design. It's always technically challenging and requires careful measurements and optimisation."

It's not just the horns themselves; careful design is needed throughout the system. "A horn designed for outright efficiency achieves that in only a narrow frequency range, requiring multiple, carefully matched horns for different parts of the spectrum. But it is possible to produce a horn with a much wider range, at relatively high efficiency and reasonably flat output up to the limits of human hearing," claims Cemlyn. "You need rigorous measurements, and often extensive filter design, plus careful driver selection. This should be encompassed in the whole system design, which for me will nearly always mean low-power Class A amplifiers, with their fantastic fidelity."

Efficient energy transfer comes down to proper horn design, which is easier said than done

The physical size of a horn is quite acceptable for treble and midrange responses. When we come to the bass, the horn would be too long and wide at the mouth to be practically feasible – although it's claimed that some audiophiles have converted their entire basement into bass horn speakers under their listening rooms! Both Cemlyn and Bryant advocate using open-baffle dipole bass speakers that push air from both ends of the driver, and are not pressure but velocity devices, significantly reducing unwanted resonances with limited off-axis effects.

The consequence of these decisions is that more care is needed with room placement, to prevent excessive cancellation of bass frequencies, yet providing clear midrange with an encompassing soundstage. The measurement and optimisation of the bass element is again something that a bespoke, low-volume producer should do as part of their whole system design. "At low frequencies," says Hill, "the open baffle design, with its figure eight polar response, provides an excellent transient response, something that is well-known by hi-fi enthusiasts. If such a device is placed directly against a wall, though, the low-frequency response will suffer from considerable cancellation, something I've experienced first-hand in both small listening rooms and sports arenas. Generally, the trick is to place such loudspeakers one-quarter of the way along the length of the room so that the axis of radiation is parallel to the wall. This gives excellent low-frequency transients and limits the excitation of room-modes, which cause position-dependent listening experiences."

So what about costs? Horns can be very expensive. If your money is really burning a hole in your wallet, then firms like Avant-Garde, Klipsch and Cessaro will be happy to take six-figure sums off your hands. Other producers such as Funktion One and Turbo Sound produce horn speakers focused on the professional PA user. However, the designers and manufacturers we've talked to will build you a speaker system for a few thousand pounds; the sort of price you'd pay at the top end of the mass market.

Where does all this leave the buyer? Horns aren't a panacea, and high-quality, complex designs and products will never be cheap. But as Cemlyn says: "A good horn is detailed, sweet and clear, with an effortless energy and presence – a real insight into the emotion of the performers" ●

Beam me up

Sonos' compact soundbar finds room to squeeze in Dolby Atmos. ***Cliff Joseph*** listens in as he takes it to the movies

Attractive sound and competitive price were the main takeaways when we reviewed the original Beam back in *HFC* 441. The Gen 2 update is a little more expensive, but includes a more powerful processor and supports Dolby Atmos for surround sound – plus there's Dolby TrueHD as found on some Blu-rays.

The second-generation Beam is virtually identical to its predecessor. Available in black or white, it's much more compact than many soundbars, making it easy to accommodate in smaller rooms and with more modestly sized screens. Inside there's a single central tweeter, four midrange drivers and three passive bass radiators. The new processor allows the Beam Gen 2 to handle five audio channels for surround effects, adding depth and height to the left, right and centre channels.

There's a single HDMI-eARC port (required for Dolby Atmos) for connecting to your TV and an optical adapter, but no 3.5mm input so you can't connect any wired components. As always with Sonos, Bluetooth is absent. Computers and mobile devices can stream audio via wi-fi, with support for AirPlay 2 on Apple devices and the Sonos app for everyone else. The app provides simple EQ controls for treble and bass, and allows you to tune the speaker using Sonos' TruePlay system and even fine tune audio and video sync for watching films and TV.

Sound quality

The Beam Gen 2 works well as a general-purpose speaker for listening to music via wi-fi, showing a light, delicate touch with the soothing melody of Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*, streamed through the Sonos app from Tidal. It creates a relaxed, open soundstage that allows the wistful tone of the violin to float gently through the air, while the clear, precise piano sets the pace and guides the violin forward. And the Beam isn't fazed when I throw the more chaotic sound of Muse's *Assassin* at it, maintaining its balance to keep the thrashing guitars and drums clear and distinct, while Matt Bellamy's falsetto and the chanting-monk backing pile up on top. Again, it's the precision of the sound that impresses most, allowing each instrument or voice to find a distinct place in the mix. I notice a little weakness in the bass, though, and while the soundbar can go fairly low its slimline design means deep bass sometimes lacks firmness.

The addition of Dolby Atmos is the main reason that the Beam Gen 2 is more expensive than its predecessor, so I switch to watching the Atmos version of *Blade Runner*. It handles the opening sequence well, balancing the dramatic bursts of flame with the shimmering percussion and floating electronic keyboards of Vangelis' soundtrack. And, despite its compact design, it is surprisingly effective at creating a sense of motion with the Atmos soundtrack. The movement of the sound of the hover-car that zooms in from the distance perfectly matches its motion on the screen. And, just a few scenes later, there's a smoothly effective left-to-right panning effect as Harrison Ford's car is overtaken in mid-air flight.

It lacks a little power, perhaps. In *Avengers: Infinity War* as Thor crashes onto the plains of Wakanda, the bass rumble and volume I've heard from larger soundbars is absent. But that's a lot to ask from such a compact chassis, and there's no denying that the Beam Gen 2 punches well above its weight, especially with the effectiveness of its Atmos support.

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Sonos Beam Gen 2

ORIGIN
USA/China

TYPE
Dolby Atmos soundbar

WEIGHT
2.8kg

DIMENSIONS
(WxHxD)
651 x 69 x 100mm

FEATURES
- Dual-band wi-fi; Ethernet
- Apple AirPlay 2
- Dolby Atmos; TrueHD

DISTRIBUTOR
Sonos UK

WEBSITE
sonos.com

Conclusion

Even so, its clarity, precision and support for Dolby Atmos still impress. It's a really good option for anyone who wants to beef up their TV's sound without spending a fortune, and its versatile wi-fi connectivity means it works well for streaming music from your computers and mobile devices too ●

Hi-Fi Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★★½
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★½
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★½
FEATURES ★★★★½
OVERALL ★★★★½

LIKE: Compact design; precise sound; Dolby Atmos

DISLIKE: No wired or Bluetooth inputs; bass could be firmer

WE SAY: A compact soundbar that nonetheless provides attractive sound and good Atmos support

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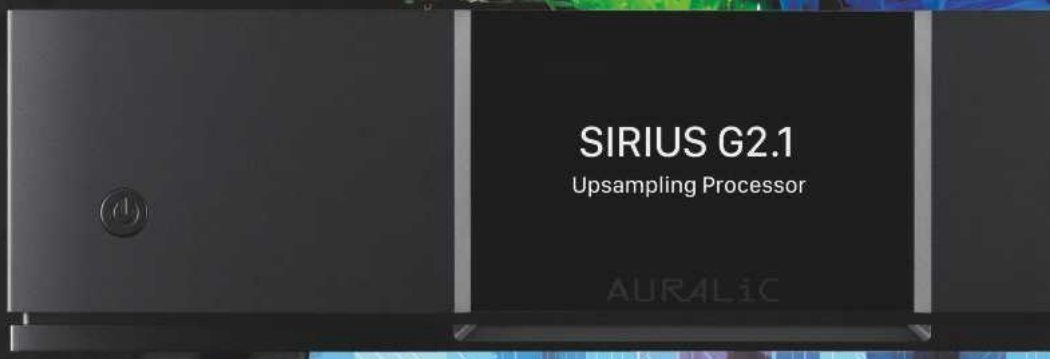

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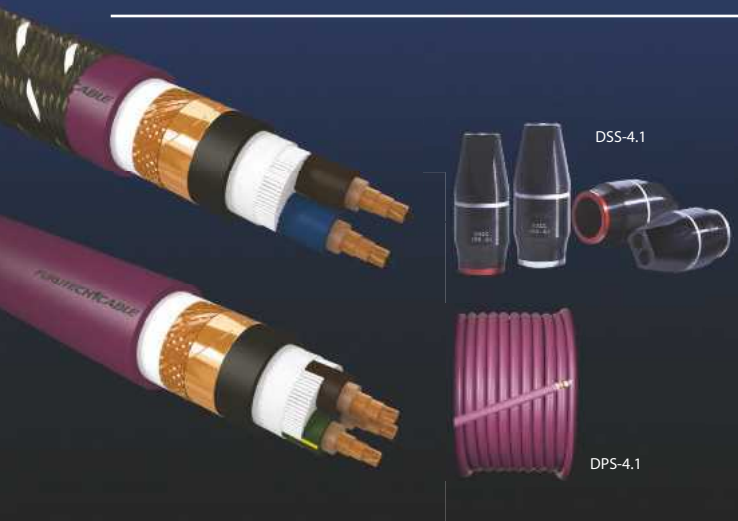

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Get physical

A sturdy and affordable outdoor alternative to Apple's AirPods sees ***Cliff Joseph*** digging out his sweatbands

It's been clear in recent months that Apple has been positioning its Beats brand as a less expensive alternative to its increasingly pricey AirPods. Available in four different colours, the Fit Pro costs £20 less than the previous top-of-the-range PowerBeats Pro. It also outguns the PowerBeats Pro with a more advanced design and the addition of active noise-cancellation features.

And, rather than the hook-over-the-ear design, the Fit Pro opts for a more conventional in-ear design, with a flexible 'wing tip' that fits inside the ear to hold it in place.

Other aspects of the design have been updated too, with smaller earbuds that house a larger 9.5mm driver. Battery life is rated at six hours when using noise cancellation, with the charging case providing an additional three charges for a total of 24 hours. And, in a pinch, the earbuds' fast-charge option means a five minute top up in the case can give you a full hour of listening time.

The Fit Pro can pair automatically with Apple devices, but there's an app for Android users. Unlike Apple's AirPods, the charging case bundled with the Fit Pro doesn't provide convenient wireless charging, so you'll need to connect it to a device that has a USB-C port. And, like all Apple headphones, the Fit Pro only supports Apple's AAC codec and the basic SBC for Bluetooth audio. Noise-cancellation features include a 'transparency' mode that allows you to listen out for traffic and other noise around you.

Sound quality

Beats headphones have always had a reputation for heavy bass but, thankfully, the Fit Pro doesn't get carried away as I listen to the MQA Master version of *You Should See Me In A Crown* by Billie Eilish from Tidal. The juttering electronic bass pulses eerily below the chorus like the sonic equivalent of a nervous breakdown. It's not overwhelming, though, and the Fit Pro manages to pick out the nervous ticking of the percussion and the sharp electronic effects.

At the other end of the sonic spectrum, there's an icy clarity to the steel guitar on Low's *Violence* and the slowly plucked notes hang in the air. Again, the Fit Pro handles the light percussion well, contrasting the delicate brushing of the cymbal with the crisper drum beat that sets the measured pace. But it's the harmonies of Mimi Parker and Alan Sparhawk that really stand out, with the Fit Pro allowing Sparhawk's deeper voice to anchor the slow, sinister chorus while Parker's harmonies float lightly above.

If there's a weakness, it's that the compact earbuds don't create much sense of space. The sound feels very much as though it's right inside my head, rather than creating a more open soundstage. This is particularly noticeable with Max Richter's *Shadow Journal*. The violin has a sharp, piercing tone to it, but the electronic effects feel static and lack atmosphere. And while the little earbuds do well to dig down to the deep electronic bass, they can't quite embrace the ominous distant-thunder sound.

The noise-cancelling is also something of a mixed bag. Turning it on doesn't appear to significantly affect the sound quality, and it's very effective at blocking out the low-frequency rumble of trains and planes when you're travelling. However, higher frequencies – particularly voices – are reduced in volume, but still noticeable and I can still hear other commuters chattering away in the background as I listen to the delicate tones of Low.

Conclusion

To be fair, this Beats offering is a good choice for Apple fans, with a competitive price, AAC support and a design that is well suited for exercise and outdoor use. However, the lack of aptX means that the Fit Pro isn't quite so appealing for Android users ●

DETAILS

PRODUCT
Beats Fit Pro

ORIGIN
US/Vietnam

TYPE
Bluetooth wireless earbuds

WEIGHT
5.6g (earbud)
55.1g (case)

FEATURES
- 9.5mm driver
- Bluetooth 5.0, with SBC; AAC
- Noise cancellation
- 6 hour battery + 18 hour charging case

DISTRIBUTOR
Apple UK

WEBSITE
beatsbydrdre.com

HI-FI Choice OUR VERDICT

SOUND QUALITY ★★★½☆
VALUE FOR MONEY ★★★★☆
BUILD QUALITY ★★★★☆
FEATURES ★★★★☆

LIKE: Compact, sturdy design; noise cancellation; AAC for Apple devices

DISLIKE: No aptX support; confined soundstage

WE SAY: Attractive sound and design – but mainly for Apple fans

OVERALL ★★★★☆

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THIS MONTH

ED SELLEY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Active in the industry since 1999, Ed's first record was *Boss Drum* by The Shamen. He splits his time between reviewing and protecting hi-fi kit from his son Will.

NEVILLE ROBERTS

EXPERTISE: ENGINEER
Neville has an eclectic taste for classical baroque and jazz. His wife was forced to marry his transmission line speakers in the eighties and he collects BBC test card music.

JASON KENNEDY

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Editor of *HFC* from 1998 to 2001, Jason's first turntable was Rega's Planar 3 and Elvis' *40 Greatest Hits* was his first vinyl, so don't go stepping on his blue suede shoes.

DAVID PRICE

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
DP two-finger typed his first hi-fi review 25 years ago. Since then he's edited *Hi-Fi World* and *HFC*. He describes himself as an "unreconstructed analogue addict".

CHRIS WARD

EXPERTISE: REVIEWER
Like his first kiss, Chris will never forget the sound of his first amp – an Aura Evolution VA-100. *War Of The Worlds* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* were his first records.

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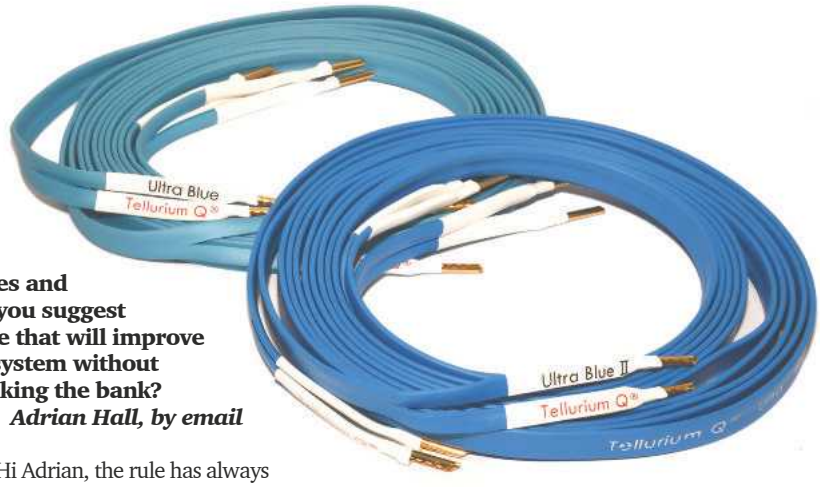
Cable guy

I've been into hi-fi for over 40 years, and through most of that time one of the most effective upgrades was with speaker cables. Are they really that insignificant these days? Does a mains cable really have more of an outcome to sound quality than a speaker cable?

I have been wondering if my speaker cables could be the weak link in my system, but have no idea where my existing cables (Chord Rumour Install) fall into the spectrum of things. My current system is around £12k budget, and I play mostly hi-res FLAC files from a Melco dedicated NAS. How much should I spend on speaker cables and can you suggest some that will improve my system without breaking the bank?

Adrian Hall, by email



Neville recommends Tellurium Q's Blue II speaker cable for Adrian

DP: Hi Adrian, the rule has always been roughly 10 percent of your system's budget should go on cables, although many people spend more and others less. I would disagree with the countless internet forum conspiracy theorists and state that cables do sound different. This is for various reasons, some of which are measurable – like radio frequency interference rejection – and others which are not (currently) such as the choice of the dielectric material, for example. I don't think we should obsess over them, but nor should we ignore them.

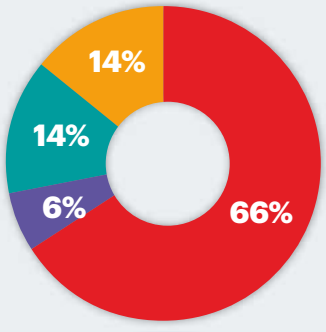
I always treat them as a kind of gentle tone control, a final way of tweaking my system's sound to make it just right when it's nearly right already – because I'm using well-matched hardware. For this reason, it's really difficult to make a specific recommendation because it's so dependent on what system you're using, your tastes and your room acoustics. I'd suggest you find a good dealer and take your Chord cables along, and do some A-B tests with some other alternatives, at around the £1,000 mark, ideally also with your amp and speakers.

CW: In my experience there is something really important about the coherence of the wiring loom that principally means the signal journey through interconnects and speaker cabling is consistent. Mains cables make a difference, but I'd focus more budget on signal cables. I think interconnects and speaker cables have to have a similar sonic characteristic. If you marry a harsh but revealing interconnect with soft but forgiving speaker cabling, you can only lose meaning and coherence. Instead, think about the inherent sonic qualities of the equipment you love and then sympathetically test cabling to maximise the qualities you enjoy hearing. The physics I've explored is a hugely complex cocktail of impedance, ▶

WE ASKED...

Do you own a record player?

- Yes and I love the black stuff
- Yes but it's gathering dust from misuse
- No but I plan to buy one
- No way!



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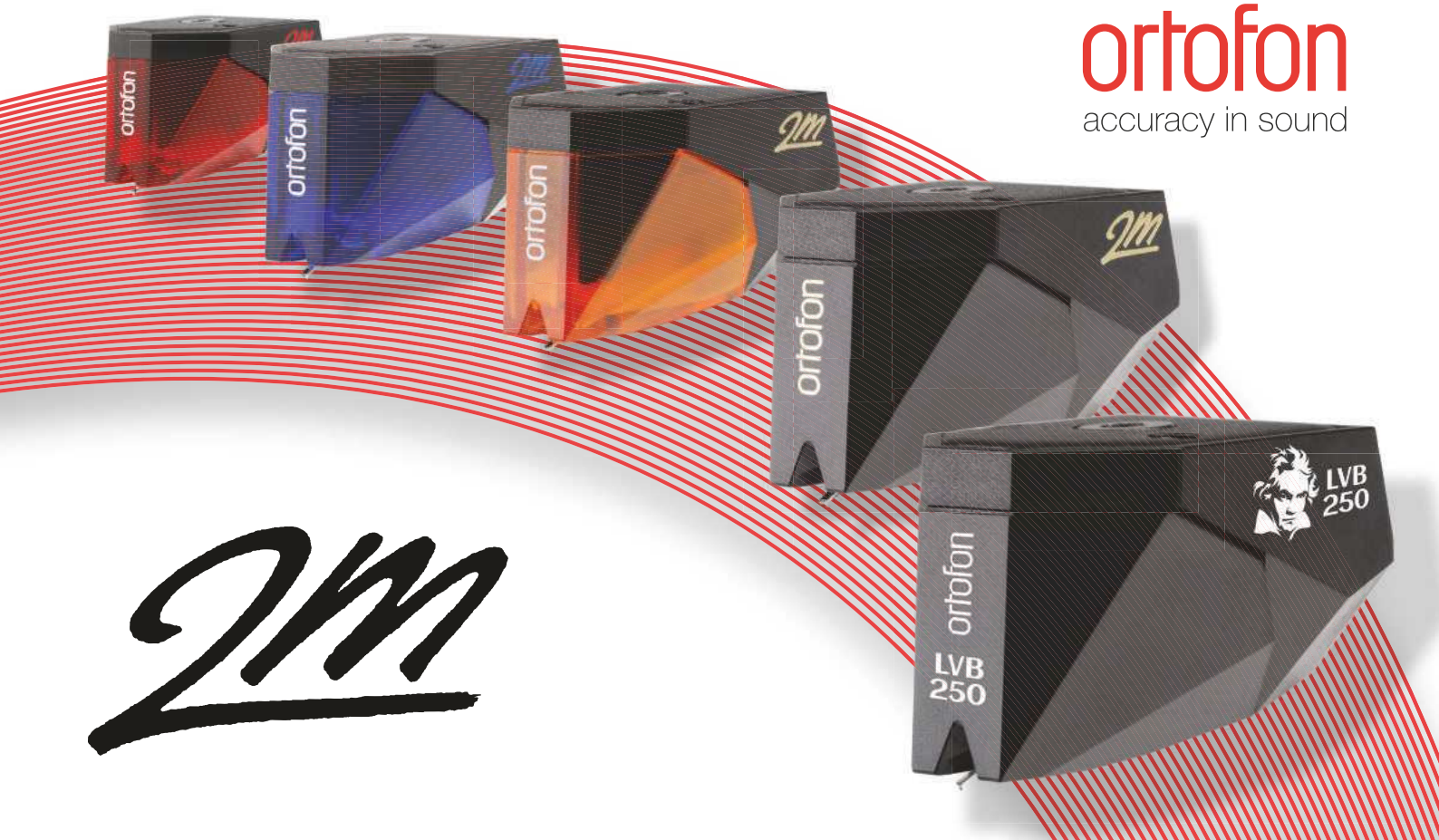

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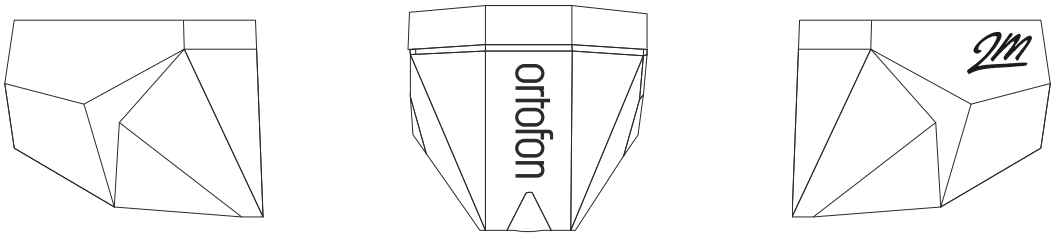
The 2M Series, so named after the abbreviation of Moving Magnet cartridges (MM), features Ortofon's split-pole pin technology for a flat frequency response, a high output for easy integration into any system and a striking visual design inspired by the facets of a diamond. Beginning with the **2M Red**, a reliable all-round performer with an open and dynamic sound, and moving up to the popular **2M Blue** with its nude-mounted elliptical stylus; the range is great for those looking for quality vinyl sound on a budget. Through the **2M Bronze** and **2M Black** models, the bigger budget delivers upgraded cartridge body materials and even more impressive stylus profiles for true high-end sound experiences. The award winning **2M Black LVB 250** sits at the top of the range thanks to its Shibata diamond, nude mounted on a boron cantilever for an intricate, delicate and detailed sound performance that simply cannot be beaten.

2M cartridge design:



2M Red
- September 2013
- May 2007

2M Blue
- September 2013
- May 2007

2M Bronze
- November 2007

2M Black
- September 2020
- December 2011

2M Black LVB 250
- September 2020
- December 2011
- EISA Award 2021
- May 2007

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inductance, bandwidth, capacitance, dialectics, joints and grounding, *but* ultimately trust your ears and how the sound sits comfortably in your own listening space. And remember that some cabling can impress for extreme resolution in a short demo, but may become fatiguing longer term. Find a friendly dealer who will do sale or return on a number of different cabling options, get a friendly audiophile to swap the cables while you stay seated and pick what helps you love your music the most.

JK: Speaker cables are still a critical part of the signal chain and arguably more important than power cables, but all cables matter. I am a big fan of Townshend Audio's cables and would recommend you seek out its Isolda speaker cable, this will give you more body and bass power than your current choice and while it's not cheap, you'll find it very hard to beat.

NR: I have had many discussions with the 'it's just a piece of wire' sceptics over the years and have reviewed quite a number of such cables, including the Tellurium Q Blue II speaker cable in *HFC* 469. I also compared the company's Ultra Blue with its new Ultra Blue II in *HFC* 477 last year. Of course, how much you spend will depend on how long the run is from your amplifier to your speakers, as well as your budget, but the Tellurium Q Ultra Blue II would be a great option, as would the offerings from Atlas Cables such as its Hyper Achromatic Z 2 Bi-Wire (*HFC* 472) or Chord Company's ClearwayX (*HFC* 468).

Shed heaven

Robert Candler's letter (Shed sounds, *HFC* 485) reminds me of the advice I had from my company's IT guru 15 years ago. I wanted to sit at the end of the garden and work on the laptop. I asked him the best wi-fi router to cover the 20m distance.

He said: "I've got just the thing", dug into his cupboard and gave me a 50m Ethernet cable! There is absolutely no substitute for proper cable. Wi-fi adds another layer of processing as well as being susceptible to interference and other wi-fi in the area.

That said, it wasn't practical to run an Ethernet cable from the front of our house to the shed at the back so for the leg from the router at the master socket to my shack at the back I use a powerline connection. It works OK and is far more reliable than the wi-fi I used to have.

I've been in the industry since modems gave the massive speed of 2.4kbit/sec and in my experience: cabling, powerline then wi-fi is the hierarchy in terms of quality. Depending on how far away Robert's shed is, my first take would be to bury some trunking and a pulling loop and an Ethernet cable. Pulling loop? That's probably not the right term, but if you tie something strong enough to one end of the cable and lay it back to the other end in the same trunking, you'll be able to pull it back in case of faults/breakages and then pull through a replacement cable without having to dig up the cable. Happy listening!

Mike Locke, Sark

When it comes to audio there is no substitute for proper cabling

JK: I'm with you on the pulling loop Mike. I put in a conduit from the house to my garden studio and didn't use a big enough pipe which required a lot of patience (and grease!) to get Ethernet through. I would suggest a 30mm plus conduit. If I did it again I would put fibre optic cable (pictured left) in as well as the Ethernet as it's a much less noisy way to transmit broadband.

NR: I agree that the best solution is to bury a shielded Ethernet cable and plug that into your audio equipment in the shed. As for choosing between a powerline adapter and a wi-fi link, what is best will largely depend on the local situation. Mains cabling can be really prone to picking up interference, and you may also have a separate circuit breaker for the power to your shed, which can also contribute to noise. If you have a good wi-fi signal and a poor mains connection, it may well be that wi-fi is better. So, if you ▶

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Jason and Ed agree: Rega's Planar 8 is ideal for Andy

can't install a cable link, I suggest that you experiment with both wi-fi and a powerline adapter to see which works best for you.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

In a spin

I've been an avid reader of *HFC* over the last 10 years and have a dilemma I hope that you can help me with regarding moving back to a vinyl-based system. I have an Arcam A19 amp, Acoustic Energy Radiance 2 speakers with a Naim CD5. I have a budget of £3-£4k, would I be better off investing in a high-end turntable or am I not going to realise its potential and should I perhaps look at a complete change (*HFC* 476 MoFi *Beautiful System* for example)?

Upgrading again in the future is a certainty so I am thinking of moving into the Rega RP8/ Michell GyroDec/Thorens TD1601 arena. Am I going to be disappointed because of the age of my amp and speakers and not realise the potential of the high-end turntable? I recently auditioned a Rega RP8, Rega Aethos and Acoustic Energy AE509 setup and was pretty impressed to say the least. This is the sort of sound I would like to build towards, but not necessarily all in one go.

Andy Wills, Aberystwyth

***DP*:** Hmmm, tricky one Andy. If you're serious about moving back you need a proper turntable that's upgradable. I think Michell's GyroDec with TecnoArm fits the bill as it is – and always has been – a great all-rounder. You can put a superb arm on it later, if you wish, but the Michell arm will suit perfectly until you've upgraded your amp and speakers substantially. I'd go for a relatively inexpensive cartridge to get you started – such as an Audio-Technica AT-VM95E moving magnet (*HFC* 444). You can dramatically upgrade this with a replacement stylus from higher up the same range.

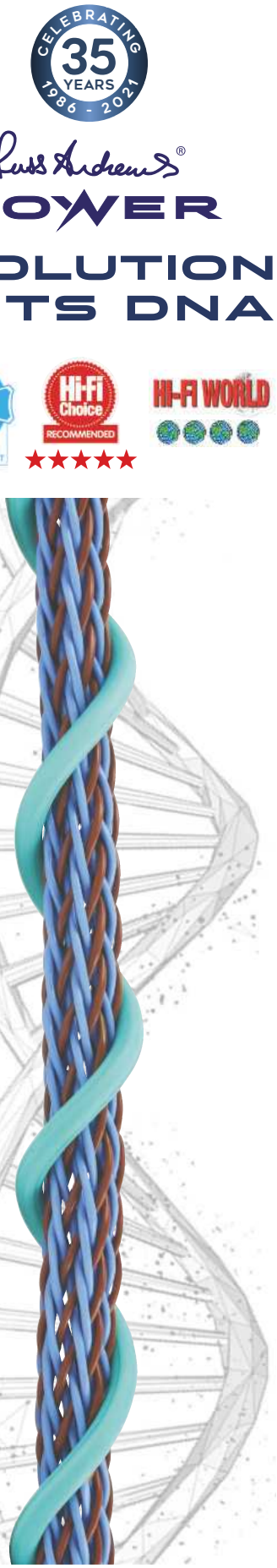
My other choice would be the Rega Planar 10 (*HFC* 456) with Apheta 3 moving-coil cartridge (*HFC* 479); this lands right at the top of your budget, and buys you a better cartridge and tonearm, but a turntable that has much less upgrade potential. It is what it is, and what it is, is very nice, but there's nowhere you can take it. The Rega has a more dry and cerebral sound than the Michell, and is arguably more detailed. It's a great package, the beauty being its tiny footprint – unlike the Gyro, which is big. Either way, I would soon be looking at upgrading your amplifier soon after – my choice would be an Exposure 3510 (*HFC* 485) with either MC or MM phono modules depending on your needs.

***ES*:** I don't see any reason why your existing system won't be able to handle a high-quality vinyl front end, producing good results until such time as you want to change them. I'd advocate allocating as much budget as possible to the turntable as it avoids

Am I better buying a high-end turntable or updating the rest of my system?

the nagging need to start making quick upgrades to it. Any of the designs you mention can handle high-spec moving-magnet cartridges for direct connection to the Arcam or you can allocate a portion of the budget to a phono stage if you prefer. Rega's Planar 8 (*HFC* 443), Vertere Sabre (*HFC* 483) and Dynavector P75 Mk4 (*HFC* 437) would be in budget and is a combo that would stand for many electronics upgrades before you felt any desire to go anywhere near it.

***JK*:** You are on the right path with the Rega Planar 8, this is a superb turntable that will inject so much life and energy into your current system that you will be surprised at what it's capable of. Then when funds allow you can replace the speakers then the amp



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and with components that are more revealing. For best results get a wall bracket or some means of isolating the Rega, this will allow it to really sing.

***CW*:** The Michell GyroDec is a fave of mine and has arguably been an unsung bargain for some time but as you've experienced, the Rega range is easy to start with and grow with. Your key decision is possibly around cartridge choice. The Arcam A19 (*HFC* 377) has a moving-magnet phono stage, so this is the cartridge type you need to stick with unless you decide to buy an extra, standalone moving-coil stage. I'd personally stick with a reasonably modest MM cartridge to start your vinyl odyssey. Then the next decision is to check with any manufacturer or dealer that the tonearm of any candidate turntable is well suited to

It's best to upgrade the various different components of your system one at a time

that cartridge. This is very much a 'foot bone connected to the knee bone, connected to the leg bone' analogy and many companies have already discovered great combos. Personally, I'd start your vinyl journey on half your budget and this could give you some options to upgrade amp, phono stage, cartridge or speakers as you might yearn for any step up in performance. The first step is possibly spinning the black stuff and checking you're desire for analogue is set to be a life-long love.

***NR*:** I think the approach of upgrading parts of a system one at a time is the best way forward because, regardless of the age of the other components, you are certain to hear improvements as you progress through the upgrades – and, in my opinion, it's more fun to do it that way. I would definitely start with the turntable, and any of the three you mention would be fantastic. Then look at the amplifier (I'm a great fan of valve equipment so you might also consider the offerings from Icon Audio or World Designs) and then consider some larger speakers, such as the Acoustic Energy AE509 (*HFC* 456)or the superb IMF200 from Falcon Acoustics (*HFC* 482).

Where to start?

I am interested in upgrading my system, which includes: JRiver media centre, AudioQuest JitterBug, AudioQuest Diamond USB cable, Benchmark DAC2 and HiFiman Arya headphones. This is how I mostly listen to my FLAC files and it sounds far better than music through my Benchmark DAC2, Ecosse DCT Master Reference RCA, Lavardin IS integrated amp, AudioQuest Slip speaker cables and Carlsson OA-52 Eighties speakers.

My feeling is that the weak link in my setup is my speakers and speaker cables. I have read a lot and my shortlist comes down to: Audiovector R3 Arreté, Revel F226Be or Duevel Bella Luna Diamante floorstanders or any suggestions you may have. I am not sure that my Lavardin integrated does any of these speakers justice, so I am also prepared to replace that. If I have to replace it I would consider a Copland CSA150, Naim Supernait 3, Bryston B135 Cubed, BAT VK-3500 hybrid or Primaluna 400.

I'd appreciate any advice to help me reach my goal to have a deep, wide, big, fast, transparent and clear sound. A neutral, musical sound with great imaging full of atmosphere and details without being too clinical.

I live in an apartment and still want to have a great relationship with my neighbours, so I almost never play at concert levels in my 20m² listening room. Thank you in advance and thanks for an excellent magazine.

Thomas Rydberg, Sweden

PMC's twenty5i range has an open, neutral and musical sound for Thomas

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JK: Hi Thomas, the Carlsson is not a speaker that I've heard, but it's omni-directional nature will mean it has a very different character to some of the more conventional front-firing alternatives that you suggest. Whatever you go for I would suggest listening first. I would recommend you try one of the models from the PMC twenty5i range, which have the open, neutral and musical sound you are after and will provide a lot more detail. They are also relatively easy to drive, so you should be able to continue with the Lavardin amp, especially if you don't need "concert levels".

ES: Care needs to be taken here if you are considering both an amp and a speaker upgrade because there are recommendations that will work for the Lavardin, but then might be completely unsuitable for the amps you mention (something that works on a Lavardin is unlikely to thrive on a Bryston for example). My gut feeling would be that keeping the amp and looking for a sensitive speaker, happy running at lower levels makes more sense than a bigger, meatier amplifier.

I'm not really familiar with the speakers you list, but I'd suggest that Proac, Fyne Audio and Focal might be good places to start looking for a speaker that delivers in the space you have and won't need anything more than what the Lavardin delivers.

Tape that

I'd like to thank David Price for his *Retro* feature on Aiwa's AD-F770 casette deck (*HFC* 485). I have owned and used mine since the Eighties and have always thought it was fantastic, even when cassette was being rubbished in the hi-fi press. I also own a Nakamichi DR10, which sounds very good – but I prefer the AD-F770. It has better facilities, such as the DATA tape tuning system, the search and scan facilities, and a real timer tape counter.

My AD-F770 has just been fettled by Dave Tutt (who is a very good and knowledgeable electronics engineer), and it sounds better than ever. I agree with David's advice to get the best one you can, but it's not easy to know which is the best! The same applies to the people you choose to fix or service the deck. In the past a local firm made a complete mess of fitting new belts, damaging a pot that controls the tape speed on playback. All my recordings were suddenly by Mickey Mouse! Thankfully, another of the good guys, Haden Boardman, fixed this problem.

Rod Theobold, by email

DP: Thanks Rod. The Eighties was a funny time and many of the UK hi-fi magazines seemed to have rather black and white views about cassette decks. There were a lot of bragging rights involved, I suspect. You could go down the pub and announce to your hi-fi enthusiast friends that you had a Nakamichi and people would think you were God – or something like that.

To me, spec really matters. If a cassette deck can't move the tape at a stable speed and have an extended frequency response and lowish noise, it's not worth bothering with. The Aiwa AD-F770 was excellent at all these jobs and bettered almost all Nakamichis, despite being far cheaper. True, it didn't quite have the 'hear through' clarity of some of the top Naks like the CR-7E, but it was close, far cheaper and way easier to use. The main reason why serious cassette guys didn't buy it was because it didn't come with bar room bragging rights. *C'est la vie*, I suppose!

NR: I'd like to add The Audiophiles Clinic (audiophilesclinic.co.uk) to your list of experts. It is run by a highly experienced electronics engineer, acoustic engineer and self-confessed music geek! He did an amazing job restoring my Studer A810 professional tape recorder to better than new using modern audiophile components.

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Media trends

Assessing the future patterns for consumer music consumption is not quite as simple as it seems, ***Neville Roberts*** discovers

Looking back over the past 12 months, you'd be forgiven for thinking that people would be increasingly turning to streaming as their primary music source. However, it turns out that it's not quite that straightforward. In its 2021 year-end report, MRC Data, which is a US data and analytics provider to the music business, notes that audio streaming of current music (released less than 18 months ago) has declined by 4.9 percent for the first time since the company began measuring streaming data. However, older music is increasingly streamed as consumers reconnect with their favourites. In fact, 41 percent of people in the UK aged between 56-74 use streaming, compared with around 78 percent of those aged below 39. The older titles also helped maintain CD sales, which were up by 1.4 percent in 2021, with 24.49 million catalogue CDs sold compared with 16.1 million current CDs – up 0.5 percent.

Vintage music formats also took on new relevance as vinyl album sales outpaced CD for the first time in MRC Data's history, (since 1991). Vinyl album sales increased by a staggering 51.4 percent year-on-year – totalling 41.7 million LPs, compared with 40.6 million CDs.

Although outsold by vinyl, CDs still showed a 1.1 percent gain in 2021, which is the format's first year-on-year growth since 2004. Even though the recorded music industry may no longer be laser-focused, this growth has been driven by releases from the upper echelons of pop stars and boosted by retailer-exclusive collectibles (packages with bonus tracks, boxed sets with t-shirts and posters or artist-autographed copies), as well as by older catalogue titles. Leading the CD onslaught was Adele's *30*, along with a trio of titles from Taylor Swift and two from international pop sensation BTS. The 2.9 million CDs sold by these three acts combined accounted for 7.1 percent of all CD sales. Of course, the music industry would prefer us to move away from physical media as streaming is easier to police and gives a wealth of usage statistics. However, many musicians, especially classical artists, use CDs as 'business cards' and this seems to be reflected in the desire to keep the format alive.

Adele, Taylor Swift and BTS accounted for 7.1 percent of all CD sales in 2021

Certainly, the growth in CD sales from 40.2 million albums in 2020 to 40.6 million in 2021 is on a far different scale than 17 years ago, when CDs sold 636.5 million in 2003 and 665.5 million in 2004. In 2021, not only was Adele's *30* the top-selling album overall but the top-selling CD, with its 898,000 units accounting for more than 2 percent of all the format's sales. If you remove *30* from the equation, the year-on-year sales of CDs would have again declined in 2021. Last year's growth in CD sales follows a year where the format experienced its worst-ever decline, and many high street stores were sadly forced to close during the first wave of COVID in 2020.

Adele: single handedly responsible for 2 percent of all CD sales in 2021

Radio waves

By contrast, looking at the radio listening habits of consumers in the US, the total listenership for music has remained steady despite the initial impact of the pandemic on in-car listening. Many of us tune-in to the radio during the drive to work and back. In fact, before I retired, my car radio was permanently tuned to Radio 3 for my daily commute. Nowadays, working from home has become the norm and this aspect of listening has now become largely obsolete. However, satellite radio and streaming live broadcast radio seem to have compensated for the loss of AM/FM listeners for music engagement, although I must admit I still use my Leak Trough-Line II valve tuner, which I renovated in 2011 and converted to stereo for my radio listening at home.

It's going to be interesting to see how the different ways to enjoy recorded music pan out over the next few years – physical media versus media-less streaming. I believe that there will always be a market for consumers to purchase an album that can be held in their hand and will allow them to enjoy the ritual of loading the media onto an appropriate player, but that's another story! ●

NEVILLE ROBERTS
Chart buster

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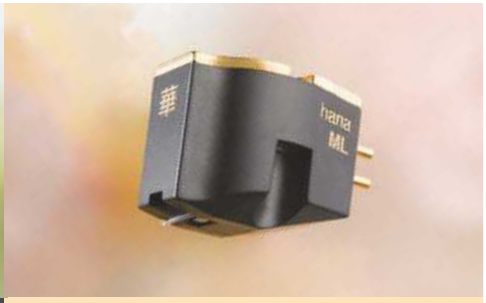

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Fight the power

As Neil Young takes Spotify to account for spreading disinformation on one of its podcasts, ***Nigel Williamson*** wonders if there's more at stake than just the truth

Sometimes the real story is what people don't do rather than what they do. Neil Young grabbed the headlines when he gave Spotify a 'him or me' ultimatum over the platform's hosting of Joe Rogan's podcast, *The Joe Rogan Experience*. Young accused Spotify of complicity in spreading anti-vax misinformation via the podcast, which it signed up on a $100-million deal and has 11-million daily listeners.

When Spotify stuck with Rogan, Young insisted his music be removed from the platform in protest. A handful of artists followed suit, including Joni Mitchell, old mates Crosby, Stills and Nash, Nils Lofgren, Lloyd Cole and India Arie.

Each departure from Spotify's ranks led to a fresh round of news stories. But does it not strike you that this is a surprisingly short list? Nobody seems to have bothered chasing the real story – which is surely not that a handful of Young's chums agree with him, but the infinitely longer list of artists who have said and done nothing.

Where are Bruce Springsteen, the Foo Fighters, Sir Paul McCartney, U2, Coldplay, the Rolling Stones and Sir Elton John in this? What about the five most streamed artists on Spotify, currently listed as Drake, Ed Sheeran, Bad Bunny, Ariane Grande and the Weeknd? And how about Adele, who made such a fuss about getting Spotify to remove the shuffle button on her most recent album? Or Taylor Swift, who withdraw her music from the platform over its miniscule artist royalty rate in 2014, only to rejoin three years later?

He stood up to MTV and opposed artists selling their music for commercials

It is possible that since writing this column some of these artists have added their names to Young's boycott and if so, my apologies to them. But even if they have, one has to note that they were slow to do so.

Some have tried to represent Young versus the world's premier streaming platform as an issue of free speech and that's an argument that can be had. Personally I'd contend that it's nothing of the sort. Young is taking a stand in favour of people not dying –- or at least not being guided towards decisions that might make them die.

Musicians should appreciate as well as anybody the importance of getting jabbed during the pandemic. There's a website called Slipped Disc, which runs a weekly tally of known deaths from COVID among professional musicians since March 2020. The last time I looked at the end of January there were a tragic 466 names on the list.

Billboard has estimated Young's annual income from Spotify at $2.8 million, a not inconsiderable sum but probably small change to him. Of course, it's tougher for smaller artists to take an ethical stand against Spotify. With live performances curtailed over the last two years, they are struggling to make a living as it is and can ill afford to sacrifice their Spotify earnings – however miserly.

Rockin' in the free world and still socking it to the man

The respected American alt-country artist Margo Price took the issue head-on with a refreshing honesty. "Massive respect to Joni Mitchell & Neil Young for always telling the truth through their art. Please remember not all of us have that kind of power/control" she tweeted. Which is why it is down to artists who can afford to place integrity above the royalties – such as Sheeran and Adele – to make a stand.

Music versus greed

But there's more at stake here and this isn't simply about Young versus Spotify. It's also about music per se. Young might release an album a year. Rogan can churn out a podcast per day. Ergo, podcasts are cheaper and thus more lucrative – and if they become Spotify's focus, music gets relegated to a secondary concern. Set aside the specific argument over anti-vaxing and Young is fighting for a streaming culture that values great music over greed.

Cantankerous and self-opinionated as he undoubtedly is, you have to admire his persistence in standing up to be counted. He was the Sixties Laurel Canyon hippie who was embraced by the punks. In the Eighties he stood up to MTV and opposed artists selling their music for commercials. Almost every decade has brought a new crusade, most recently banning Donald Trump from playing *Rockin' In the Free World* at his rallies.

You can cynically note the reason money isn't as important to him as integrity is because he's already as rich as Croesus. It's fair comment. But we should be glad he's around and still picking fights where he perceives a wrong, ever ready to take on The Man ●

NIGEL WILLIAMSON
Taking a stand

Picture credit: Danny Clinch

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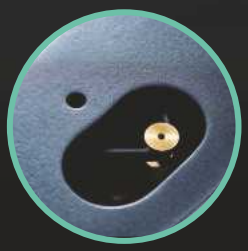

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What Apple wants...

As the Cupertino company's latest plans hint at the development of a next-gen successor to Bluetooth, ***Cliff Joseph*** finally has hope for its wireless future

I've given Apple a fair amount of stick for its approach to digital audio over the years. It's a company that loves eye-candy and hi-res video, but seems to have a tin ear when it comes to audio technology. Apple Music was one of the last major streaming services to offer lossless and hi-res audio to its users, and then Apple was forced to admit that its AirPod headphones – including the top-of-the-range AirPods Max, which weigh in at more than £500 – weren't actually capable of playing lossless audio because of their reliance on Bluetooth and Apple's ancient AAC codec. Even if you're using wired headphones from a manufacturer other than Apple, it still advises you to use an external DAC, as most Apple devices can't handle hi-res audio beyond 24-bit/48kHz on their own (the exception being its latest MacBook Pro laptops, which support sampling rates up to 96Hz).

Of course, the limitations of Bluetooth have long been known to audiophiles and, to be fair, the technology is pretty old. Originally developed in the late-Eighties, Bluetooth was never intended for high-quality music streaming. However, its low bandwidth and lossy audio compression proved useful in the early days of the internet when bandwidth was at a premium and compressed MP3 files were the primary format for digital audio.

Apple has a patent for an over-the-air optical signal that reduces latency

Apple likes to do things its own way, and frequently turns its nose up at technology developed by other companies. Apple did actually support aptX on the Mac for a while, but in 2015 the technology was acquired by Qualcomm, which is primarily known for its Snapdragon chips and processors that are widely used in Android smartphones, and are now attempting to break into the laptop market.

In other words, aptX is owned by one of Apple's biggest rivals. Throw in a long-running, multi-billion-dollar legal dispute between the two companies, and you can see why Apple has resolutely ignored the improvements in Bluetooth audio offered by aptX over the years. But while that might make sense from a business point of view, it has meant that Apple users have had to put up with outdated audio technology for years, while still paying premium prices for the fashion-conscious AirPods.

But, just recently – and after taking a kicking over the fact that the expensive AirPods Max can't actually play the lossless audio provided by Apple's own streaming service – the company has shown signs that it recognises the limitations of Bluetooth and AAC. In a recent interview, Gary Geaves, Apple's VP of Acoustics, hinted at its frustrations with the technology: "It's fair to say that we would like more bandwidth" he noted cagily.

Apple's AirPods Max can't play the lossless audio from its own streaming service

And what Apple wants, Apple generally gets. Rumours soon began to surface that the next generation of AirPods, expected to arrive towards the end of 2022, would finally support lossless audio. Details were scarce, but the Apple-watching website Patently Apple, recently revealed that the company had been granted a patent for a device – thought to be its forthcoming virtual-reality headset – that can transmit audio via both Bluetooth and a new "over-the-air optical signal". Apple's focus for this new technology seems to be on reducing latency for synching audio and video – which makes sense for a VR headset – but the information provided by the company also indicates that the headset can transmit the optical audio signal to a receiver built into a set of wireless headphones. So while this new technology primarily seems to arise out of the development of Apple's VR headset, it also opens the door to a new generation of AirPods that finally support lossless audio. Knowing Apple's fondness for over-hyped brand names, the new tech will probably be called something like ThunderClap or SuperSound.

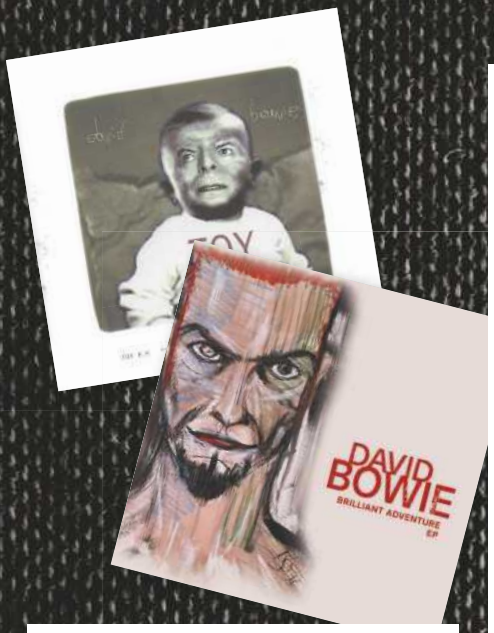
Change of heart

Whatever it's called, it's unlikely that this new wireless audio tech will completely replace Bluetooth, which provides cheap and convenient wireless audio for billions of headphones and speakers already in use all around the world. But, after years of serving up low-quality audio, it might now be Apple that comes up with a next-generation technology for headphones that can provide high-quality audio that is both lossless and wireless for the first time. ●

CLIFF JOSEPH
Wire straits

DROP OF THE POPS!

With so many goodies on offer for Record Store Day 2022, ***HFC*** has scoured the list to pick out a few treasures for your delectation. Here's what we discovered



After a couple of years innovating around COVID restrictions, for 2022 Record Store Day has reverted to its original programme so the event will take place internationally on one day: Saturday 23 April. Involving nearly 250 independent record shops across the UK, it will see tons of special collectable items released, some limited editions, some picture discs, some available for the first time ever and some specially created for the occasion.

Of course, it wouldn't be Record Store Day without a special David Bowie release and this year there are two new titles to add to your collection: *Brilliant Adventure* and *Toy*. *Brilliant Adventure* is a 12in EP pressed on 180g black vinyl via Parlophone featuring previously unheard tracks from the *Outside* era. *Johnny Downloader* – an early version of *I'm Afraid Of Americans* recorded during the sessions with Brian Eno for the album and mixed in November 1994, but not released on a Bowie album until 1997's *Earthling* – an alternative single mix of *I Have Not Been To Oxford Town* and two tracks (*Outside's A Small Plot Of Land* and the Jacques Brel cover *My Death*, performed by Bowie and pianist Mike Garson at a fundraiser for the New York Public Theatre at the Shakespeare Festival in New York on 18th September, 1995).

Then there's *Toy*, a 180g, five track 10in EP on black vinyl, which features the previously unheard *Shadow Man (Vocal & Piano Mix)*, an alternative stripped-back mix of the *Toy* album track, along with unreleased live versions of *Dig Everything* and *The London Boys* recorded at the final Glastonbury warm-up show at the Roseland Ballroom, New York on 19 June, 2000. The EP also contains three tracks – *You've Got A Habit Of Leaving (Radio Edit)*, *Silly Boy Blue (Alternative Ending Mix)* and *Can't Help Thinking About Me (Live Mark Radcliffe Show BBC Radio 1 Session)* – previously only available as streaming singles and which are making their physical debut.

Both *Brilliant Adventure* and *Toy* are also available for RSD on CD.

Arguably RSD 2022's most astonishing rarity is *Shuckin' Sugar* from the Delmore Recording Society, INC. It's an album compiled from hitherto undiscovered early tapes of cult legend American folkie Karen Dalton. According to the press release: "In 1962, Karen summoned Richard Tucker to join her in Colorado, extolling the healthier lifestyle, and plentiful gigs at Boulder folk club, The Attic. Upon his arrival, the pair solidified their personal and professional relationship, riding horses in the mountains and performing as a duo at parties and venues throughout Denver and Boulder. Stories of the spell they conjured – and rumours of tapes! – have circulated among friends and musicians who witnessed them, but until now no recorded evidence had turned up. *Shuckin' Sugar* is the glorious result of three reel-to-reel tapes that miraculously found their way to us in November 2018; which featured two shows from The Attic in January 1963, and a benefit concert for The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) recorded the following February. Their gigs would often include brief solo sets from Karen and Richard, in addition to the duets, and all seven solo songs of Karen's found on the three reels are included here, as well as five duets."

The album is limited to only 3,500 copies pressed at Jack White's Third Man facility on transparent, natural vinyl with an eight-page insert featuring newly discovered photos.

Sandy Denny galore

Another fab folkie rarity is *Sandy Denny, The Early Home Recordings*, a double black vinyl LP limited to 2,000 copies via Earth Recordings. The collection comprises 27 songs laid down on tape prior to the singer joining Fairport Convention, nearly all making their vinyl debut, including two different demos of her classic *Who Knows Where The Time Goes* plus covers of songs by Jackson C Frank, Fred Neil and some more traditional folk numbers.

This year's RSD also boasts yet another Sand Denny release via UMC/Island, *Gold*

Dust Live At The Royalty, which features highlights from her final concert which are now making their debut on vinyl.

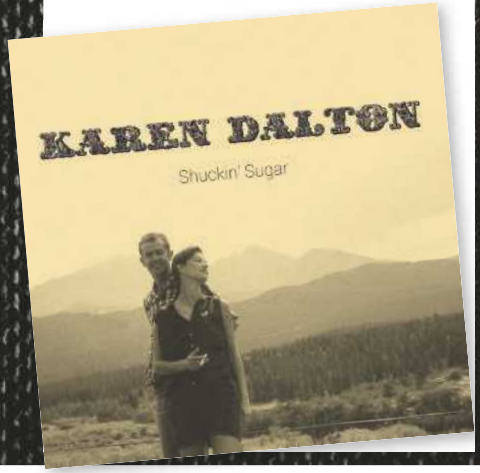
Lou Reed's *I'm So Free* also sounds like something to get excited about. Subtitled *1971 RCA Demos*, this collection marks the occasion when, on 27 October, 1971, Lou walked into the first recording session of his solo career. Released on vinyl for the first time here are 13 of the tracks he demo-ed that day.

Another absolute treat is *Trees Of The Ages: Laura Nyro Live In Japan*, a vinyl LP originally issued only in Japan in 2003. Featuring 16 tracks recorded at Kintetsu Hall, plus five recorded at On Air West, it includes *And When I Die*, *Wedding Bell Blues* and *Save The Country*.

The Many Sides of Love – The Complete Reprise Recordings Plus! is a 15-track collection featuring soul great Darlene Love's rare singles for the Reprise label with the vocal groups The Blossoms and The Wildcats, plus her own solo work. Via Real Gone Music, there are also bonus tracks – her 1985 Elektra recording of *River Deep, Mountain High*, her 2014 duet with Bette Midler on *He's Sure The Boy I Love* and two 1990 recordings for the Sire label. None of this material has ever been on LP, and this release comes with an insert featuring photos and extensive liner notes, pressed on teal vinyl limited to 3,500 copies.

Dusty Springfield's *See All Her Faces* was an album of off-cuts originally released on Philips in 1972. Long out of print, it's going to be available again now on heavyweight black vinyl via UMC/Mercury along with a mini-LP of bonus cuts from the period, enhanced artwork with added photos and archive material.

Echo & The Bunnymen's *B-Sides & Live (2001-2005)* is a double LP on 180g vinyl



Elton John's 1977 recordings *The Complete Thom Bell Sessions* is another RSD exclusive, available for the first time in the UK on vinyl while *Iggy Pop Berlin '91* is a limited-edition double vinyl LP taken from the Brick By Brick Tour and released now on black and white and pink and red vinyl.

Joan and Joni

Joan Jett & The Blackhearts' *Acoustics* is an eight-song LP including five newly recorded acoustic tracks from the upcoming double LP *Changeup*, plus three previously unreleased tracks exclusive to RSD 2022 and, as part of the Joni Mitchell Archives comes *Blue 50: Demos, Outtakes And Live Tracks*, an exclusive 180g black vinyl LP consisting of previously unreleased, never-before-heard recordings from her Reprise era.

Scott Walker's *Boy Child* was a compilation originally released in 1990. While the original 20-track CD has gone on to become the definitive introduction to his early work, it was only available for a short time as a single vinyl LP with a truncated tracklist. This new version features the full collection as a deluxe, gatefold, double LP set on 180g white vinyl with the addition of the classics *Always Coming Back To You* and *30th Century Man* plus the rare non-album track *The Rope And The Colt*. The album artwork also includes the original liner notes by Marc Almond from 1990, Neil Hannon's notes from 2000 and brand new notes from Jarvis Cocker exclusive to this edition.

Keeping the hippies happy, there's also Gong's *In The 70's* featuring performances which have never been released on vinyl before. The first 30 minutes of this double LP boast the classic line-up including Daevid Allen, Steve Hillage, Pierre Moerlen and Didier Malherbe. The collection comes in a double album jacket, printed inner sleeves, one sticker and two marble vinyl discs – one purple and pink, the other blue and yellow.

Meanwhile, *The Grateful Dead Wembley Empire Pool, London, England 4/8/72 (Live)* comes via Rhino and celebrates the 50th anniversary of the legendary '72 tour across five 180g remastered black vinyl LPs.

This year's RSD also offers plenty to whet the appetites of jazz buffs. Albert Ayler's *Revelations* is a five-LP set via Elemental Music, which claims to be the first complete authorised release of the free jazz icon's penultimate concert appearance, featuring more than two hours of previously unreleased music taken from stereo masters recorded by France's ORTF. The package comes with a 16-page insert with previously unpublished photos, and interviews with jazz greats Sonny Rollins, Archie Shepp, Carla Bley, John Zorn, and many more.

Art Blakey & The Jazz Messengers are represented by *In My Prime*, a vinyl reissue of the legendary jazz drummer's complete NYC sessions recorded at the CI Recording Studios in 1977. Released via Tidal Waves Music it comes as a deluxe 180g double vinyl edition limited to 2,500 copies worldwide in a gatefold sleeve featuring the original artworks and session shots.

There's also a great set from Charles Mingus – *The Lost Album From Ronnie Scott's*. This is a limited-edition 180g triple vinyl LP from Resonance of a never-before-released live recording from August 1972. It features a stellar band with alto saxophonist Charles McPherson, tenor saxophonist Bobby Jones, trumpeter Jon Faddis, pianist John Foster and drummer Roy Brooks, and includes an extensive insert with rare photos and interviews with band members. It's also available for RSD in a three-CD set.

Chet Baker fans are in for a treat as there's a triple 180g vinyl offering up for grabs. Titled *Live In Paris – The Radio France Recordings 1983-1984*, this is a collection of previously unreleased live recordings from the archives of ORTF Radio France and comes in appropriately deluxe packaging.

April's RSD has some choice releases for movie soundtrack buffs too. Angelo Badalamenti's *Blue Velvet – Original Motion Picture Soundtrack (Deluxe Edition)* comes as a double LP via Concord/UMG. The fabulous soundtrack to David Lynch's creepy 1986 movie starring Kyle MacLachlan, Isabella Rosselini and Dennis Hopper, *Blue Velvet* was Lynch's first collaboration with Badalamenti, and it's now been expanded by 60 minutes with the addition of the famous 1963 recording of the song *Blue Velvet* performed by Bobby Vinton as well as previously unreleased film cues, alternatives and outtakes entitled *Lumberton Firewood*.

The package features new interviews with David Lynch, Angelo Badalamenti, Kyle MacLachlan and producer Fred Caruso and the cover features the original 1986 Italian movie poster art designed by Enzio Sciotti. The double LP's pressed on marble-ized blue vinyl.

More Morricone

Soundtrack maestro Ennio Morricone is represented by *Una Pistola Per Ringo/Il Ritorno Di Ringo*, two spaghetti movie scores from 1965 directed by Duccio Tessari and starring Giuliano Gemma as the gun-toting protagonist. Featuring the work of conductor Bruno Nicolai, the choir of the Cantori Moderni di Alessandroni, trumpeter Michere Lacerenza and harpist Anna Palombi, the scores come on limited edition clear red vinyl. Also on offer by Morricone is *Trio Infernale*. Limited to 500 copies on magenta marbled vinyl, this is the score to the 1974 European thriller. And finally, there's *I Know I Will Lose You*, a collaboration between Morricone and Chet Baker, released on 10in black vinyl.

The Nowhere Inn is the soundtrack to St. Vincent's recent tour mystery movie and features three new original songs – the title track, *Palm Desert* and *Wave*.

A few of the others which piqued our curiosity include *Live Seeds*, a double 140g transparent red vinyl LP via BMG/Mute of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds in concert with numbers including *The Mercy Seat*, *Deanna*, *Tupelo* and *The Ship Song*. The fourth side is a special no-audio etching. Then there's supreme shoegazers AR Kane's *Americana*, a double 1992 compilation album via Luaka Bop, which has never been released on vinyl before. Another collectable rarity is grunge heroes Alice In Chains' *We Die Young*, a 12in via Sony CMG. Originally released in 1990 as a promo-only vinyl, this limited-edition has been remastered and includes the track *Killing Yourself*, which is exclusive to this EP.

It wouldn't be RSD without a David Bowie release and this year there are two new titles

Echo & The Bunnymen's *B-Sides & Live (2001-2005)* is a double LP on 180g clear vinyl via Demon which has been previously only available as a digital release. It brings together rare acoustic recordings plus *Killing Moon* and *Lips Like Sugar* from Reading 2005.

Among the multitude of reissues on offer, special mention must surely go to Kevin Rowland's *My Beauty*, which caused quite a stink when it was first released in 1999 mainly because the ex-Dexy decided to pose on the cover in his "man dress" which he then proceeded to wear in a rather raucous appearance at the Reading Festival. Cherry Red is re-releasing *My Beauty* now on translucent vinyl with pink splatter, the LP comprising 12 cover versions, "personally chosen by Kevin and adapted to make the lyrics more directly reflective of his life".

There are a couple of neat Beth Orton reissues too – a limited-edition double album version of 1999's *Central Reservation* pressed on pillar box red vinyl, and a limited edition double LP version of *Trailer Park* on blue vinyl. Celebrating its 35th anniversary, Jonathan Richman & The Modern Lovers' final studio album, *Modern Lovers 88*, is being re-released specially for RSD featuring an all-analogue mastering from the original tapes. It comes pressed on 180g coloured vinyl. Dire Straits' biggie *Love Over Gold* is also on offer via UMC/Mercury; a half-speed master recut to celebrate the album's 40th anniversary. This limited edition reissue features an embossed lithograph, a certificate of authenticity and is one of this year's releases to benefit the War Child charity in the UK.

Blur is represented by *Bustin' + Dronin'*, a double heavyweight transparent blue and transparent green vinyl edition of the band's 1998, Japan-only remix compilation. Never available on vinyl before (it was a double CD pack originally), it features nine mixes of tracks from the band's 1997 eponymously titled album by William Orbit, Adrian Sherwood, Moby, Thurston Moore and John McEntire.

A little less famous, but still enormous fun nonetheless is *Songs For The Sad Eyed Girl* by Biff Bang Pow!, a re-release via Glass Modern of the 1990 LP from Creation boss Alan McGee's very own band. Unavailable on vinyl since its initial release, it comes in a green tinted version of the original sleeve on green vinyl with sleeve notes by McGee himself. On a sadder note there's *Remembering Dolores* by The Cranberries, a double LP via UMC/Island that was originally released on 6 September 2021, which would have been the singer Dolores O'Riordan's 50th birthday. It featured a specially curated 15-track streaming-only

compilation of songs from the band's eight album catalogue and now comes on vinyl with three bonus tracks.

The Gun Club *Live At The Hacienda '84* has only been released on DVD before, never on CD or vinyl. It's a 13-song LP in a double album jacket on red and white splatter vinyl.

Another release on vinyl for the first time in the UK Is Happy Mondays' *Uncle Dysfunktional*, their fifth long-player originally released in 2007. The artwork has been re-worked by Central Station Design and it's limited to 2,000 copies worldwide on pink vinyl.

Mansun and Motörhead

Originally released in February 1997, Mansun's *Attack Of The Grey Lantern* debuted at number one in the UK album chart and included the hit singles *Wide Open Space*, *She Makes My Nose Bleed*, *Taxloss* and *Stripper Vicar*. Now it's back as a 2,000-only limited-edition picture disc.

On a somewhat heavier note, Motörhead's *The Lost Tapes Vol.2* is a double vinyl LP of a previously unreleased concert recorded at UEA in Norwich in October 1998. Available as a double album on 140g orange and yellow marbled vinyl, Pixies *Live From Coachella 2004* features *Where Is My Mind?*, *Here Comes Your Man*, *Debaser* and other fan faves. Now released on vinyl for the very first time, this RSD exclusive features the entire 20-song set with an etching on side D.

The Prodigy's *The Day Is My Enemy Remix Album* is a compilation of the band's favourite remixes from the 2015 studio album. It's numbered with no download code while *The Sire LPs 1981-1989* is a six-album collection of Ramones greats re-released for the first time since their original issue on black vinyl featuring *Pleasant Dreams*, *Subterranean Jungle*, *Too Tough To Die*, *Animal Boy*, *Halfway To Sanity* and *Brain Drain* plus one LP of rarities on splatter vinyl. They all come in a numbered, fluorescent slipcase with a sticker sheet.

Released to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Rex Orange County's *Apricot Princess* album, a new RSD version comes as a double with three previously unreleased live versions of *Happiness*, *Television/So Far So Good* and *Four Seasons* recorded at New York's Radio City Music Hall in 2020. It's a limited-edition release on green vinyl.

Another RSD exclusive is the 25th anniversary edition of Suede's *Sci Fi Lullabies*, a triple 180g clear vinyl set expanded from the original 1997 release collecting together B-sides and fan favourites *Europe Is Our Playground*, *My Insatiable One* and *Killing Of A Flashboy*.

Wire's *Not About To Die* was first released as an illegal bootleg back in the early Eighties comprising of recordings made for EMI as demos for the band's 1978/1979 albums *Chairs Missing* and *154*. Now it gets its first official release on Wire's own Pinkflag imprint.

Finally, in the albums offerings, there's a new double LP compilation curated by RSD of classic Patti Smith tracks from 1974–1996, including *Gloria*, *Because The Night*, *Dancing Barefoot* and *People Have The Power*.

RSD 2022 also has a splendid line in singles on offer. *Jukebox Babe/Speedway is* a release by the late, lamented Aan Vega of Suicide fame. Issued on 7in via Sacred Bones, *Babe* is available for the first time since its initial pressing in 1981 while *Speedway* is the very first version Vega recorded of this fan favourite and it's never been released before.

Lou Reed's *I'm So Free* marks the very first recording session of his solo career

Covers by Associates finds the late great Billy Mackenzie and co on a 140g clear vinyl 12in doing spiffing versions of other folks' numbers, including Diana Ross' *Love Hangover*, David Bowie's *Boys Keep Swinging* and Simon Dupree & The Big Sound's *Kites*.

Rolling Stones and Faces fans might like to check out *The Birds Ride Again*, a limited edition box set of five 7in singles via the Flood Gallery. The complete collection of the original run of 45s from Ronnie Wood's Sixties London R&B outfit, it comes with a bonus EP featuring four rarities on vinyl for the first time. All tracks have been remastered and they fit inside a deluxe box with a 48-page booklet featuring previously unseen photos, posters and ephemera.

The Sunday Girl EP is a double 7in package via UMC/Capitol celebrating one of Blondie's 1979 worldwide number-one single. This four-track set comes in a gatefold sleeve with disc one featuring the original single plus the French version on red coloured vinyl and disc two featuring two previously unreleased tracks, on yellow vinyl – a demo from 1978 and a live version recorded at the Paramount Theatre, Portland, Oregon in January, 1979.

Alternatively, you might fancy *Big A Little A/You're Already Dead* by Crass. The original 12in single for *Big A Little A* was released in 1980 and featured *Nagasaki Nightmare* on the flip. Crass decided that the track *You're Already Dead* is more pertinent in today's society, so is creating a new 12in which includes an exclusive patch or pamphlet, yet to be decided, perfectly in-keeping with the band's original anarchic spirit.

Frightened Rabbit is reissuing two EPs for RSD. The first is *A Frightened Rabbit EP*, originally released in 2011 and now on 10in red vinyl. The second is *State Hospital*, a 12in version on silver vinyl of the 2012 EP including *Wedding Gloves*, a collaboration with Arab Strap vocalist Aidan Moffat.

Noel Gallagher

Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds' contribution to RSD is *Magic Secrets No 1*, an individually numbered 7in featuring demos of *We're Gonna Get There In The End* and *Trying To Find A World That's Been And Gone: Part 1* which were released at short notice as a New Year goodwill message from Noel to the fans for 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Cypress Hill's *How I Could Just Kill A Man* first appeared on their debut LP and for its 30th anniversary in 2021, two brand new remixes were released digitally. Now they're repressed for RSD on black 10in vinyl.

And last but most certainly not least, there's The Jungle Brothers who've made a bit of a thing of releasing 7ins for RSD. *Jimbrowski/On The Run* is the third instalment, partnering tracks from their 1988 *Straight Out The Jungle* LP on a limited-edition coloured vinyl 45.

As reported in *HFC* recently, there's a bit of a critical pile-up in the production of vinyl worldwide at the moment so several releases intended for RSD's April date have had to be delayed until 18 June. See next month's issue for updates.

For more info on the 23 April offerings and a list of participating independent record shops go to: recordstoreday.co.uk ●

94 **William Wordsworth**
Orchestral Music
Volume Four

96 **Jean-Marie Leclair**
Concertos For Violin
Op 7 & 10 (No.4 & 5)

99 **Wet Leg**
Wet Leg

Musicreviews

Picture credit: David James Swanson

Jack White
Fear Of The Dawn

★★★★★

ALBUM OF THE MONTH

CD **Third Man**

IT'S HARD TO think of any artist who has seized DIY control of the entire production, distribution, promotion and marketing of his music as totally as Jack White. Via his Third Man enterprise he not only has his own studio and record label, but his own mastering facility and pressing plant and a growing chain of record store outlets, including one recently opened in London.

Lockdown hit most people hard, but it was a double blow for the restless, endlessly creative former White Stripes man who also does his own artwork and directs his videos. Not only was he unable to tour, but Third Man was also put on hold.

With business suspended, what to do while waiting for normal service to be resumed? The answer was obvious. He went into his studio and recorded not one but two new albums as the follow up to 2018's chart-topping *Boarder House Reach*. We now have the first in *Fear Of The Dawn*.

Seemingly, it was not his intention to make two albums, but as the pandemic continued he recorded more tracks until he had at least two dozen new songs. "I just kept writing and recording as it was happening, with no real urgency to it because of the lockdown," he explains.

Once the world started opening up again, he realised the songs he had recorded divided naturally into two records. Due in July, *Entering Heaven Alive*, White tells us, is: "very mellow, like a Sunday morning album". Meanwhile, the high-octane, hard-hitting tracks of *Fear Of The Dawn* are the exact opposite, although with characteristic contrariness, White then went and released an acoustic track from the second album before the first had come out.

But for now let's concentrate on *Fear Of The Dawn*, which features some crunching riffs and monumental guitar shredding that reminds one of kt tunstall's comment after seeing the White Stripes' 2005 performance at Glastonbury that White is: "this generation's Jimmy Page".

Taking Me Back is one his best riffs since *Seven Nation Army*, although *That Was Then (This Is Now)* and *Morning, Noon And Night* are not far behind. There's more to White than his guitar, of course, for he can also wail and moan like a surrogate Robert Plant and he's in fine voice here, particularly on *The White Raven* and *Eosophobia*. There's plenty of freaky invention too, from the wild theremin on the title track to the Arabic semi-tones on *Hi-De-Ho*.

"What's the trick?" he demands at one point. But there's no trickery or artifice. Just a natural genius for transforming classic rock tropes into something that sounds thrillingly fresh and original. And being White, the album is available not only in regular formats but in no less than five limited-edition coloured vinyl variants. ***NW***

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Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal

Get On Board

★★★★½

CD **Nonesuch**

ALMOST 60 YEARS ago Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal played together in the Rising Sons before both embarked on long and diverse solo careers. Here they come full circle to reunite on a set of songs associated with the old-time folk-blues duo of harmonica player Sonny Terry and guitarist Brownie McGhee. Cooder and Taj both first heard them as teenagers in Fifties California. Now the kids who were inspired by the elderly duo are old-timers themselves and invest these

Taj and Ry come full circle to reunite on a set of songs associated with old-time folk-blues

songs they've known all their lives with a profound love and respect. With Taj blowing the harp and Cooder on guitar, mandolin and grainy vocals, the sound is earthy and primitive yet sophisticated in its masterful execution. Many of the songs such as *Pick A Bale Of Cotton*, *The Midnight Special* and *Drinking Wine Spo-De-O-Dee* have become folk-blues standards, but it's a pleasure to hear them again played with such joy. ***NW***

Father John Misty

Chlöe And The Next 20th Century

★★★★★

CD **Bella Union**

FATHER JOHN MISTY – aka J Tillman – returns for his fifth album, his first since 2018's *God's Favourite Customer*. Despite his alt-folk and Americana roots, there's a real sense that he has a playful, theatrical side and here he really goes for it. We have Seventies-style ragtime, ballroom-inflected tracks like *Chlöe* and *Fallen Girl*, the bossa-nova tropicalia of *Olvidado* and epic, strings-drenched power ballads like *Q4*. On *Goodbye, Mr Blue* he keeps long-time fans happy with the kind of honeyed folk that makes you swoon. With this dazzling array of influences Tillman inhabits a sweet spot somewhere between Paul Simon and Rufus Wainwright. ***PH***

Karen Dalton

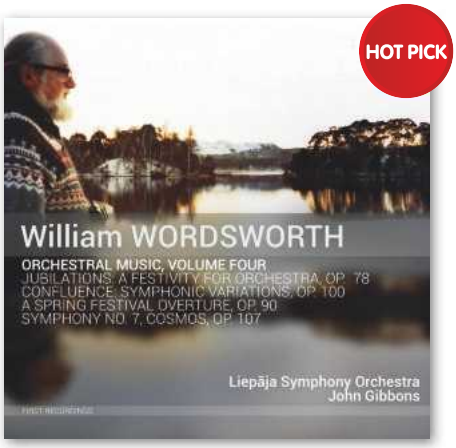
In My Own Time

HOT PICK

★★★★★

180g vinyl **Light In The Attic**

THE GREATEST SINGER you've probably never heard, Dalton was a bluesy folkster of Cherokee/Irish decent who played cover versions in the early Sixties alongside future luminaries Bob Dylan and Fred Neil. *In My Own Time* is her second and final LP, recorded in Woodstock in 1971 and featuring her signature takes on the old civil war weepie Katie Cruel and Dino Valenti's *Something On Your Mind*, of which disciple Nick Cave notes: "It's the most extraordinary vocal I've ever heard. And I've heard Billie Holiday..." Dalton died in 1993 aged 55, pretty much penniless and homeless; a name known only to cognoscenti. It's time to become one. ***SS***



A good clean recording with no suggestion of daffodils whatsoever

HOT PICK

William Wordsworth

Orchestral Music Volume Four

Liepāja Symphony Orchestra; John Gibbons

★★★★★

Stream/download **Toccata Classics**

VOLUME FOUR OF Toccata Classics' survey of orchestral works by British composer William Brocklesby Wordsworth (born 1908–1988 and not to be confused with the English Romantic poet of daffodil fame) features three shorter works and his seventh symphony *Cosmos* – a powerful atmospheric piece that takes you on a fascinating eventful journey. In a single unbroken movement divided into seven sections lasting about 25 minutes, the work makes a strong impression due to the taut inexorable logic of Wordsworth's writing. It's a good clean recording that's smooth, open and nicely distanced, but clear and detailed with excellent clarity throughout. ***JH***

AUDIOFILE VINYL ★★★★½

Erroll Garner

Liberation In Swing

180g vinyl **Mack Avenue**

THIS LAVISH SET is presented in hardback book form with 60 pages of text and images including Garner's artwork, alongside the Complete Symphony Hall Concert over three discs and Sessions on a slab of white vinyl. Garner was a master of swing piano with a very distinctive style and a hit album under his belt when he went to Boston to perform with Eddie Calhoun on bass and Kelly Martin on drums in January, 1959. This 27-song concert captures them at the peak of their powers.

The recording is in mono, which means that there's no real sense of depth or scale (on a stereo cartridge at least), although the sound is impressively solid and there's plenty of life and none of the thinness that's normally associated with older recordings. Garner and his band play up a storm and inject energy into their performance that fully warrants the enthusiastic audience applause. Garner's vocalisations are ever present, but they don't get in the way of his robust rhythms and solid left hand. The fourth disc is in stereo, but only inasmuch as the drums and bass are in one channel and the piano in the other. A hi-res 24-bit/192kHz download is additionally provided for good measure. ***JK***

Picture credit: Abby Ross (Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal)

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Aldous Harding

HOT PICK

Warm Chris

★★★★★

CD **4AD**

HANNAH TOP (AKA Harding) returns with her off-kilter, quirky yet charming folk-tinged vignettes. She likes collaboration, and ropes in H Hawkline, Seb Rochford, Gavin Fitzjohn, John and Hopey Parish and Sleaford Mods' Jason Williamson. Aside from her sometimes shape-shifting voice – which is quiet, strong, vulnerable, delicate and powerful (it's quite a trick she has a habit of pulling off record after record) – there are jazzy interludes, parps of horn, melancholic piano and lilting guitars. Harding is one of the more interesting artists in terms of approach and execution, and *Warm Chris* once again proves it. ***PH***

All-rounder Leclair was a dancer and violinist before trying his hand at composing

Jean-Marie Leclair

Concertos For Violin Op 7 & 10 (No.4 & 5)
Leila Schayegh
La Cetra Barockorchester Basel

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Glossa**

BORN IN 1697, Jean-Marie Leclair led a wonderfully colourful life, starting out as a dancer and later becoming one of France's greatest violinist/composers. Then, in the 1740s, he abandoned the violin for an unsuccessful career as an opera composer and ended up being murdered in 1764. This CD of four violin concertos from Op 7 and Op 10 completes the series of Leclair violin concertos with Leila Schayegh and La Cetra Barockorchester Basel. The playing is crisp and highly accomplished and the recording sounds open and detailed, with excellent clarity and a sweet yet incisive tonality. ***JH***

Valentina Lisitsa

1908
Piano works by Rachmaninov and Ravel

★★★★☆

CD **Naive**

CONFESSION TIME; SERGEI Rachmaninov's *Piano Sonata No.1* is not among my favourite works. But Ukrainian pianist Valentina Lisitsa plays it with such soulful depth that all my prejudices are very quickly blown away. It's a darkly brooding performance, hugely atmospheric and full of quiet smouldering passion. Meanwhile, Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard* is taken slowly and again the playing has impressive intensity that creates a sense of dread and foreboding. The recording is amazingly good – superbly full and sonorous and effortlessly capturing every last nuance of Lisitsa's playing. Impressive stuff! ***JH***

M Ross Perkins

E Pluribus M Ross

★★★★☆

CD **Karma Chief Records**

HARRY NILSSON, MIKE Nesmith, XTC and even 10cc lurk influentially around the second album from this psychedelic popster. *Butterscotch Revue* has a strong dose of *Sexy Sadie* and makes the case for the revival of the kind of music that went great with mind-altering substances 50 years ago. And that's where these 12 tracks are rooted, and can never quite wrest free from. *Mr Marble Eyes*, *Venti Gasp Inhale* and *Wrong Wrong Wrong* are big on Sixties stylings, but come across as a bit twee. There is still much to be enjoyed here, particularly for those that enjoyed the late-Sixties the first time round. ***PSH***

COOL COLLECTION

With *Flying Dream 1*, his ninth album fronting Elbow and *HFC*'s five-star lead review back in the January issue gathering heaps of praise from all and sundry, what better time to discover a trio of long-players that Guy Garvey absolutely adores?

Talk Talk

Laughing Stock
Verve (1991)

Talk Talk's fifth and final LP sees Hollis orchestrating an "arranged spontaneity" of like-minded musicians. "The last two Talk Talk albums need to be listened to loud and they need to be listened to over and over again," points out Garvey. "I'm stunned every time. How they make me feel is because of the generosity of spirit, it's like weaving spiders' webs from scraps. So delicate, so precious, but not a note or tone is uneventful."

Radiohead

Amnesiac
Parlophone (2001)

Radiohead's fifth album, went straight to number one in the UK. Garvey says: "I love the orchestration, I love the sentiment. Thom Yorke is going through a peaceful patch on that record. He sounds like for the first time he is crooning to you a little bit, like he is a little more comfortable... Sometimes Thom's lyrics are like being berated. It's like being shouted at, and then at other times he seems to pull a rainbow out of the sludge out of nowhere."

Melody's Echo Chamber

Melody's Echo Chamber
Fat Possum (2012)

Melody Prochet's previous band, My Bee's Garden, supported Tame Impala on their 2010 European tour, which is why TI's Kevin Parker produced this Shoegaze-y in excelsis LP. "You can hear its making," says Garvey, "in the same way you can hear Joni Mitchell in her lonely log cabin. Just the idea of the moon cast out on the water. That paints a picture. I can hear excitement and new love all over that record."

Picture credits: Emma Wallbanks (Aldous Harding) and Shutterstock.com (Guy Garvey)

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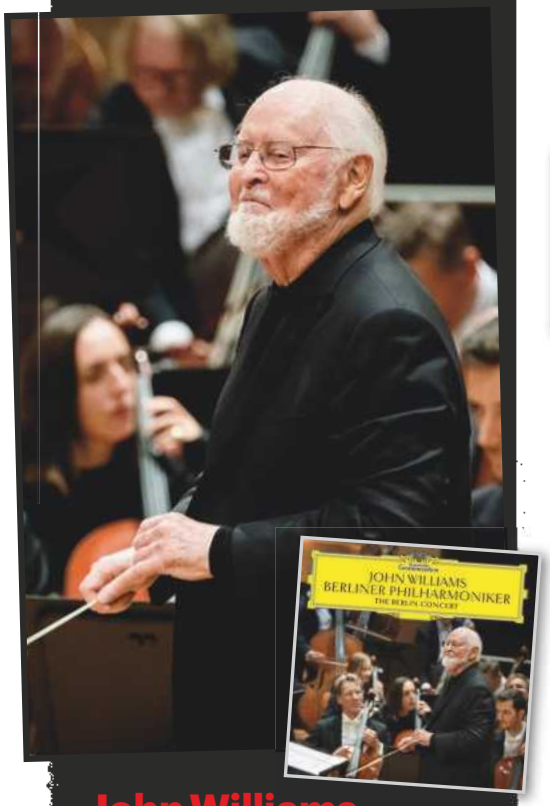


John Williams

The Berlin Concert
Berliner Philharmoniker

HOT PICK

★★★★★

2x CD **Deutsche Grammohon**

THE BERLIN PHILHARMONIC fully cement their reputation as the world's greatest orchestra with these magnificently sumptuous performances of Williams' immediately recognisable classic film scores. Their playing – in equal parts rich, glowing and incredibly refined – is beyond praise. However, one does slightly miss the feisty swashbuckling brilliance that the London Symphony Orchestra brought to scores like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters* in the original soundtrack

The playing – in equal parts rich, glowing and incredibly refined – is beyond praise

recordings. No matter; the end result from the Berliners is still a feast for the ears. Such opulent luxurious playing elevates the music to a higher plane, far beyond its 'film score' origins. Deutsche Grammophon's recording is rich, burnished and sonorous, sounding impressively natural and refined throughout – amazingly so, given the recording was made live. ***JH***

Bach

A New Recital
Piano Works
Cyprien Katsaris

★★★★☆

Download **Piano 21**

FRENCH PIANIST EXTRAORDINAIRE Cyprien Katsaris signed with Sony in 1994 with plans to record Chopin's complete piano works. But over the next few years only seven discs were ever issued. One of the first (released 1995) was titled *Italy In Bach*. However, Katsaris recorded quite a bit more Bach at the time and here are these 'lost' recordings from 1994, plus the *Suite In E* that was recorded later in 2000. The playing has commanding presence and real personality, while the recordings are very impressive, with a much fuller richer piano sound than the original Sony *Italy In Bach* release. ***JH***

Loop

Sonancy

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Cooking Vinyl**

SOUNDHEADS, REJOICE. IT'S been 32 years since a new album from the repeato-rock legends, but it's hardly a jarring comeback. The droning guitar mantras and motorik beats of Robert Hampson's legendary group inform the grooves of many modern purveyors of the heaviest of heavy riffs, such as Gnod and much of Rocket Recordings' roster. *Sonancy* is joyously familiar and also maps new territory, with lysergic post-punk brews bubbling away. To paraphrase an iconic entry in the Loop canon, the 10 taut, adrenalised compositions here are less a *Fade In*, more a succession of big bangs – so turn it up! ***SB***

Babel

Yoga Horror

★★★★☆

CD **PME Records**

FOR THOSE IN need of new Cocteau Twins material, this stunning debut is as good as it gets for now. Not that this is a karaoke exercise – the Finnish duo sound like a product of the 21st century. There's samples and synths and on *Teeth* and *Futile Minds* an acoustic guitar under the dreamy vocals. *Flowers* slowly builds with its layered vocals, subtle percussion giving way to Ultravox-level drum patterns until fading into the ether. It's a journey that you've never taken before, but one that you'll return to time and again when this old world starts getting you down. ***PSH***

Bugge Wesseltoft

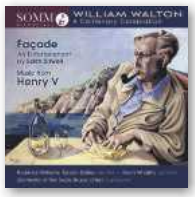
Be Am

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Jazzland**

GIANT OF THE Norwegian new-jazz scene Wesseltoft has released few solo albums – he prefers collaborations, which have varied widely over the keyboard groove meister's career. Here we find him alone on most of the pieces on this beautiful album. His piano tunes are shimmering and meditative but tuneful, reminiscent of Satie and Jarrett alike. The glow of the reverb captured alongside the warm beauty of the pieces. Håkon Kornstad joins BW's Rhodes for two numbers and birdsong and kalimba bring atmosphere to another. Sometimes sad but always hopeful, this is a melodic ray of tranquil delight. ***JK***



William Walton

Façade;
Music from Henry V
Orchestra Of The Swan
Bruce O'Neil

★★★★☆

CD **Somm**

HERE'S A SCINTILLATING performance of *Façade* that really emphasises the strange witty brilliance of Edith Sitwell's poems. Roderick Williams and Tamsin Dalley cope effortlessly with every tongue-twisting syllable, making it sound easy and the small orchestra plays brilliantly. The music to Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry V* is played by small forces as if it were a pit band at a theatre performance. While the effect is obviously less grand than the version for full orchestra, it sounds more idiomatic. The recording – crisp, clear, lifelike and detailed throughout – sounds very good with a slight increase in volume. ***JH***

Picture credits: Samuli Saarinen (Babel), Monika Rittershaus (John Williams) and Hollie Fernando (Wet Leg)

The Dead South
Easy Listening For Jerks Pt 1& 2

★★★★☆

CD **Six Shooter Records**

THERE'S NOT MUCH call for a bluegrass album that covers the likes of Ween and The Doors, but here it is and it's a joy. Utilising banjo, mandolin cello and guitar, the Canadian quartet has a punk sensibility channelled through traditional Appalachian instrumentation. All four sing and do so with alacrity. *People Are Strange* is that rare cover that surpasses the original while *You Are My Sunshine* is stripped of its joviality and elevated with an ominous edge aided by a banjo solo that transports the listener to the porch in *Deliverance*. From start to finish, it's enormous fun, it's quirky, it's played to perfection and it's finger pickin' good. ***PSH***

Ravel
Ma Mére L'Oye, Boléro
Sinfonia of London
John Wilson

HOT PICK

★★★★★

SACD **Chandos**

THIS WONDERFUL 83-MINUTE SACD offers up some excellent performances of Ravel's most popular works for orchestra, several in slightly different editions to those that are normally heard. *Bolero* has two alternating side drums (rather than just the one), placed left and right, plus triangle and castanets at the end. Because great care has been taken over the small details, you hear lots of things that are normally obscured. The recording produces exceptional immediacy and clarity, capturing subtle instrumental detail from soft to loud with superb impact and fidelity, and some impressive deep bass. ***JH***

Wet Leg
Wet Leg

HOT PICK

★★★★★

CD **Domino**

RHIAN TEASDALE AND Hester Chambers caused a stir with zeitgeisty debut single *Chaise Longue*. Full of sarcastic attitude and scathing, withering satire, it was always going to be interesting to see how Wet Leg could stretch that style out over an album. But they've done it. Packed with 12 brilliant tracks, it touches on post-punk, new wave and pop. *Ur Mum*, *Oh No* and *Angelica* are full of 21st-century, of-the-moment references to mobile phones, texts, parties and Diet Coke. It's fun and there's a real focused, thrilling energy on show. Now watch Wet Leg become massive. ***PH***

Let's Eat Grandma
Two Ribbons

★★★★☆

CD **Transgressive**

IT'S FOUR YEARS since Let's Eat Grandma's *I'm All Ears* won album of the year from Q. The follow up brims with great songs about growing up as life becomes more frayed, but still shot through with joy and hope. Opener *Happy New Year* with its blazing synths is the kind of euphoric dancefloor epic Faithless used to deliver. Yet it's not entirely typical and songs such as *Watching You Go*, the reflective *Strange Conversations* and the title track offer a more melancholic beauty. The widescreen production of David Wrench (The xx, Frank Ocean) is outstanding, too. ***NW***

Mendelssohn
Songs Without Words Volume 1
Peter Donohoe

★★★★☆

CD **Chandos**

AS A POWERHOUSE pianist that specialises in big works, Peter Donohoe is not an ivory tickler you'd immediately associate with Felix Mendelssohn's work. But he's known and admired these works from a young age. Poor Mendelssohn has long been tarred with accusations of genteel blandness. True, his *Songs Without Words* can sound a touch twee, but Donohoe plays them with quiet strength and dignity emphasising their charm and beauty. He also has the sheer technique to make light of virtuoso pieces like the *Rondo Capriccioso*. The piano is recorded in a clear but warm acoustic and sounds very natural. ***JH***

STREAMING CHARTS

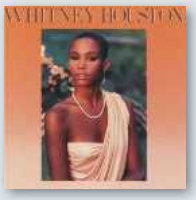
qobuz.com's top-10 most popular streaming albums

1 Alt J
The Dream

2 Magdalena Hoffmann
Nightscapes

3 Various Artists
Welcome to the Black Forest (The Sounds of MPS)

4 Fleetwood Mac
Rumours



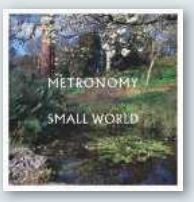
5 Whitney Houston
Whitney Houston

6 Eddie Vedder
Earthling

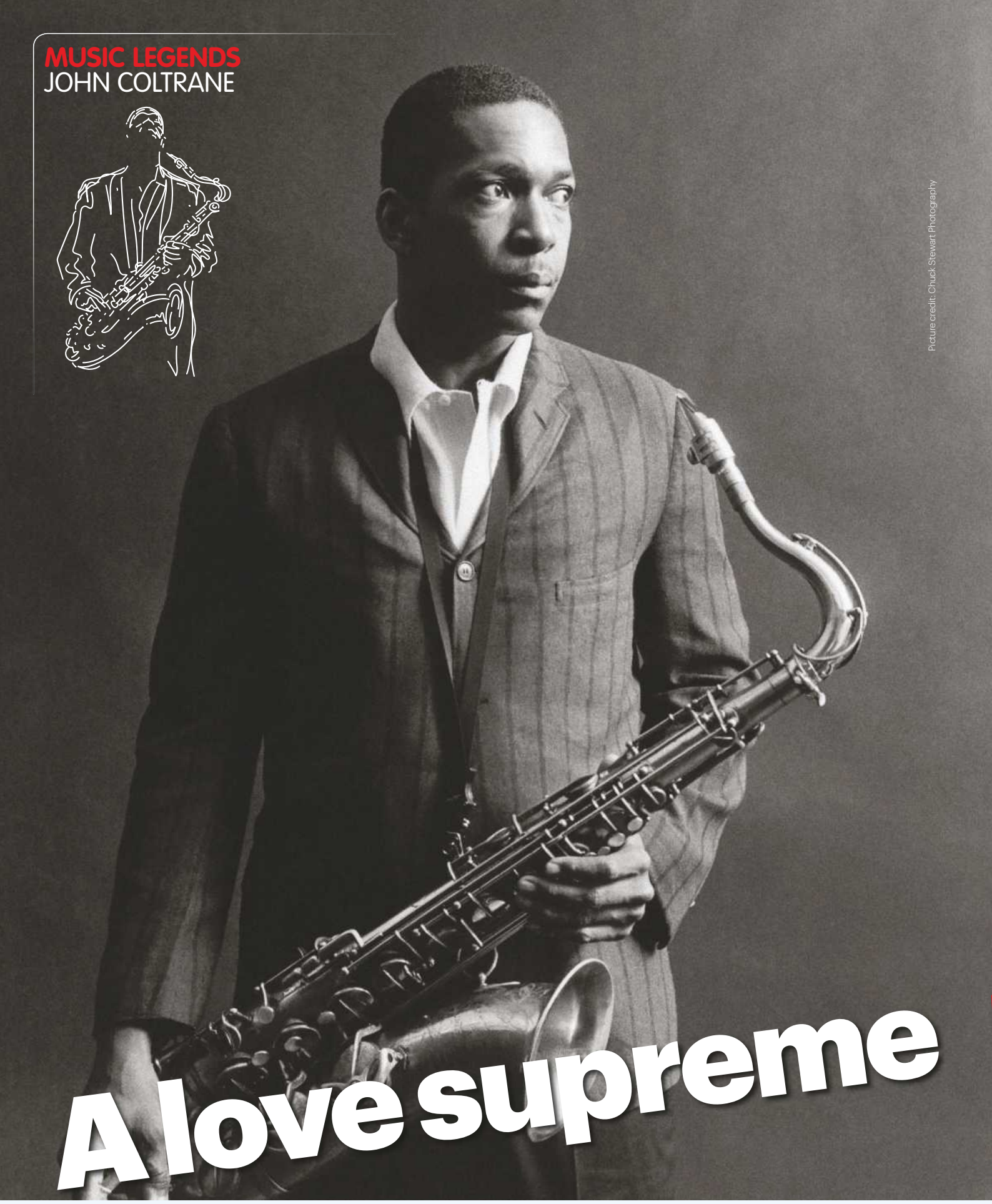
7 Big Thief
Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe In You

8 Natalie Cole
Unforgettable... With Love

9 Neil Young
Harvest



10 Metronomy
Small World



Picture credit: Chuck Stewart Photography

A love supreme

You can take your pick as to what is the greatest jazz album of all time, says ***Nigel Williamson***, but John Coltrane played on both of them

Earlier this year, British magazine *Jazzwise* produced a list of its 100 Jazz Albums That Shook The World. Sitting at number one was Miles Davis' *Kind Of Blue*, a record burnished by Coltrane's tenor sax playing. Just behind it at number two came Coltrane's own album *Giant Steps*, released a mere six months later in what was modern jazz's *annus mirabilis*.

Either way, we're talking the greatest sax player of all time. How can we make that assertion with such certainty? Well, try the technical innovation; the combination of discipline and experimentation and how Coltrane extended the speed and range of the saxophone. Add the intensity of his playing; the emotional power and passion; the energy and stamina of the "sheets of sound" as his cascading notes came to be known. Then consider the complexity of his vision; the spirituality of his music and the way he extended the vocabulary of his instrument and pushed the boundaries of free improvisation further than anyone had done before.

Coltrane's death at the age of 40 in 1967 robbed the world of one of the two great geniuses of modern jazz when he was at the very peak of his powers. Davis, the genre's other towering genius, gifted us another 24 years of innovative and inventive music, so we can only guess at what new heights he might have scaled.

His recording career was crammed into little more than a dozen years, but he left a legacy that changed the face of jazz and which still reverberates to this day.

There was his work as a member of Miles Davis' quintet and then sextet, spanning half a dozen albums between 1956 and 1959 and culminating in *Kind Of Blue*. Coltrane's tenor sax playing perfectly complemented the minimalist eloquence of Davis' trumpet, his solos fitting the needs of the music with an alchemical perfection.

Half way through the sessions for *Kind Of Blue*, Coltrane went into the studio to begin work on his own masterpiece, the aptly titled *Giant Steps*. It was his first album to feature all his own compositions and the sheer technical challenge of numbers such as *Countdown* and the title track – which includes 26 chord changes in its 16-bar theme – has made them test pieces for saxophonists ever since. Stuart Nicholson, who led his own jazz band in the Seventies before becoming a respected author, reckons *Giant Steps*: "may well be the most influential jazz album of all time".

Yet Coltrane was only just beginning and there were further spectacular leaps to come, in a process of continuous artistic evolution until his untimely death. In an eight-year period of intense creativity between 1959 and 1967, he experimented with modal jazz, freeform avant-garde abstraction and cosmic jazz and expanded jazz's horizons in the direction of world music by absorbing influences from oriental and African music.

Coltrane copied Charlie Parker in more ways than one and went on to become a heroin addict

In his lifetime he released some two dozen authorised LPs as a bandleader, which are chronicled in our album-by-album guide. Since his death there have been dozens more, compiled retrospectively from unreleased studio sessions, live recordings and his work as a sideman, almost all of which are worthy of your time and attention.

John William Coltrane was born on 23 September, 1926 in North Carolina. When he was 16 he moved to Philadelphia to escape the segregation and Jim Crow laws of the Deep South. He played clarinet and horn in a community band, but for his 17th birthday his mother bought him an alto saxophone, which he was soon playing in a cocktail lounge trio when he was still underage.

Just before his 18th birthday on 5 June, 1945 he saw Charlie Parker playing alto sax with Benny Goodman's Quartet at the Philadelphia Academy of Music. His friend Benny Golson, who accompanied Coltrane to the concert, later recalled: "We both nearly fell over the balcony rail, all the cells and nerves in our bodies wild with abandon. Their music was crazy and we went into an exuberant delirium. We had heard strong performances in our young lives, but nothing like this. This was beyond good. It was completely new, innovative, and profound. We were drunk with happiness and bewilderment... Our musical world changed that night."

He left that night with his head full of Parker and Gillespie and the new sound of bebop and two months later joined the US Navy. Posted to Hawaii, he played with the base's swing band, the Melody Masters, but had to appear as a guest performer because it was meant to be an all-white ensemble. Despite this, he was soon leading the band in all but name and made his first recordings with Navy musicians shortly before his discharge in 1946.

In a sentimental mood

By the time he returned to Philadelphia, little more than a year after he had left it, he had become a formidable musician. He joined Jimmy Heath's band and perfected his Charlie Parker imitations by practising "25 hours a day", sometimes falling asleep with his horn still in his mouth.

By 1949 he had been invited to join Gillespie's band, where he was thrilled to fill Parker's shoes and attempted to copy his solos. He stayed for two years, but copying someone else's style ultimately left him unsatisfied. "What I didn't know with Diz was that what I had to do was express myself," he later confessed. "You can only play so much of another man".

He played in bands led by Earl Bostic and Johnny Hodges, getting what he called an "education from the older generation". Then in 1955 he got a call to join Miles Davis, replacing Sonny Rollins in his quintet.

The recordings he made with Davis during 1955 and 1956 found Coltrane at a crossroads. Parker was still there in his playing, but he had begun to absorb a range of other influences too. It resulted in an unevenness of style that was almost schizophrenic – but excitingly so as he strove to find his own musical voice.

ALBUM BY ALBUM

1957

COLTRANE

His first session and album as a bandleader, recorded in New York in 1957 after he had kicked his drug habit, following being sacked by Miles Davis. Standards are mixed with two Coltrane originals.

1958

BLUE TRAIN

The best of his early albums as bandleader, recorded during his residency with Thelonious Monk. The title track, *Locomotion* and *Lazy Bird*, composed by Coltrane, have become jazz standards.

1958

JOHN COLTRANE WITH THE RED GARLAND TRIO

The trio of Red Garland on piano, Paul Chambers on bass and Art Taylor on drums provide stellar backing on a set which includes the brilliant 13-minute *Traneing In*.

1958

SOULTRANE

Recorded three days after Coltrane had finished sessions for Miles Davis' *Milestones*, the "sheets of sound" style gets an early outing on a set of standards by the likes of Count Basie, Billy Eckstine and Irving Berlin.

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1960

GIANT STEPS

The masterpiece and a contender for the greatest jazz album ever made. Seven original compositions, some breath-taking blowing – and a landmark that ensured jazz music would never quite sound the same again.

1961

COLTRANE JAZZ

A smart mix of standards and originals, including *Village Blues*, the first recording with the classic John Coltrane Quartet of pianist McCoy Tyner, drummer Elvin Jones and bassist Steve Davis.

1961

MY FAVOURITE THINGS

Showtunes by Gershwin, Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hammerstein dramatically reinvented by Coltrane in modal style and his first outing on soprano sax alongside his better-known tenor playing.

1961

AFRICA/BRASS

An unusually big and brassy band sound with 21 musicians including such jazz greats as Freddie Hubbard and Eric Dolphy. Just three long tracks, including the mighty *Africa* taking up the whole of side one.

The albums he made in his first spell with Davis are a mixed bunch, not least because of the manner of their recording. Having signed a contract with Columbia, the label Davis would remain with for the next 30 years, he still owed a set of discs to his former label, Prestige.

Giant steps

The result was Davis' quintet recorded four albums – *Relaxin'*, *Cookin'*, *Workin'* and *Steamin'* – in two marathon sessions of single takes. Nevertheless, Coltrane's growing self-confidence is more than evident alongside Philly Joe Jones' strident drumming, Red Garland's spacey piano and Paul Chambers' economical double bass lines.

Yet there was a bigger problem than Davis' need to fulfil an old contract, for Coltrane had copied Charlie Parker in more ways than one and had followed him in becoming a heroin addict. After he had turned up sick and dishevelled for a gig at New York's Café Bohemia in April 1957, Davis fired both Coltrane and his fellow addict Jones and broke up his quartet.

Paradoxically it turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to Coltrane. He went back to Philadelphia and kicked his addiction by sheer will-power and without any medical help whatsoever.

It was a turning point in more ways than one. Several years later in the liner notes of *A Love Supreme*, he wrote that he had experienced: "a spiritual awakening, which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. At that time, in gratitude, I humbly asked to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music." His imperial phase was about to begin.

He pushed the boundaries of free improvisation further than anyone had done

With Coltrane restored to rude heath both spiritually and musically, he was offered $100 a week by Thelonious Monk to join him on a five-month, six-nights-a-week residency in New York's East Greenwich Village.

It was another key staging post in Coltrane's musical evolution. "I learned from him in every way, theoretically and technically," he said. "I would talk to Monk about musical problems and he would sit at the piano and show me the answers by playing them."

There's not much in terms of recorded material from their collaboration, but a live 1957 recording – *Thelonious Monk Quartet With John Coltrane At Carnegie Hall* – unreleased at the time but subsequently discovered in the vaults and which finally appeared on Blue Note in 2005, is highly recommended and shows how Coltrane was developing his own uniquely fluent sound.

Around the same time he began recording under his own name for Prestige and Blue Note and by the time the call came in 1958 to rejoin Davis, he had recorded four albums as a band leader. The best of them is probably *Blue Train*, which contained mostly his own compositions, including the title track, *Moment's Notice* and *Lazy Bird*, all three of which have become standards.

His first recording after reuniting with Davis was 1958's *Milestones*. With Coltrane on tenor and Cannonball Adderley on alto, the album lived up to its title as a seminal moment in the development of modal jazz – that is to say, scale patterns other than major and minor and using modes as a basis for improvisation rather than chord sequences.

Even better was to come with 1959's *Kind Of Blue*, surely the most famous and influential jazz album ever made. Astonishingly, in the middle of the *Kind Of Blue* sessions, Coltrane went into the studio to begin recording his debut for the Atlantic label, which was to

1961

OLÉ COLTRANE

Recorded just two days after *Africa/Brass* with a smaller ensemble, although Hubbard and Dolphy were retained. Spanish folk stylings are explored on *Olé* and African forms on *Dahomey Dance*.

1962

LIVE! AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD

Backed by McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones from his classic quartet and Eric Dolphy on bass clarinet, a challenging free jazz set recorded in New York City in November 1961.

1962

COLTRANE

Not to be confused with the similarly eponymous 1957 debut on Prestige, this fine set recorded for the Impulse! label finds Coltrane backed by Elvin Jones with McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison.

1963

DUKE ELLINGTON & JOHN COLTRANE

Ellington flirts with post-bop modernity in updating a set of his classic tunes, including *In A Sentimental Mood* on which Coltrane essays one of his most romantic solos ever.

1963

BALLADS

Coltrane and the quartet in a mellower mood with modal versions of jazz ballads and show tunes such as *All Or Nothing At All* and *Nancy With The Laughing Face*.

1963

JOHN COLTRANE AND JOHNNY HARTMAN

A rare vocal album with former Dizzy Gillespie vocalist Johnny Hartman on classic ballads such as *Lush Life*, *My One And Only Love* and *You Are Too Beautiful*.

1963

IMPRESSIONS

A mix of live and studio tracks but a key work in Coltrane's canon, notable for two extended 15-minute pieces – *India* and the title track, both recorded live at the Village Vanguard in 1961.

1964

LIVE AT BIRDLAND

Despite the title, another hybrid album mixing live and studio recordings including a 10-minute take on Mongo Santamaria's *Afro Blue* and a brilliant studio take of the civil-rights inspired *Alabama*.

1965

A LOVE SUPREME

His second most revered album. Presented as a suite in four parts and built around a four-note motif that becomes the vocal chant "a love supreme", it heralded a thrilling abstraction.

1965

THE JOHN COLTRANE QUARTET PLAYS

Lacking the calm spirituality of *A Love Supreme* as Coltrane delivers arresting versions of songs such as *Chim Chim Cherree* and *Nature Boy*. CD reissues added *Feeling Good*.

become the second most famous and influential jazz album ever made.

My favourite things

On *Giant Steps*, Coltrane found a calibration between rhythm, melody and harmony that sounded almost supernatural and launched the trademark style which was famously dubbed: "sheets of sound". It was a perfect description for although the individual notes he played were technically precise, somehow the sound went beyond the confines of fixed pitch to convey pure emotion. In a brilliant analogy, Pat Metheney likened it to the musical equivalent of an MC Escher picture.

Coltrane's modal period continued through albums such as *Coltrane Jazz* and *My Favourite Things*, both released in 1961, as his classic quartet built around pianist McCoy Tyner and drummer Elvin Jones took shape. He also added soprano sax to his mastery of the tenor after Miles Davis brought him back an instrument as a gift from a tour of Europe.

My Favourite Things consisted of show tunes by Gershwin, Cole Porter and Rodgers and Hammerstein reinvented in modal style, so that the cheerful pop of the title track, as later heard in *The Sound Of Music*, was turned into a hypnotic eastern dervish dance. The recording was a hit and became Coltrane's most requested tune.

Coltrane's death robbed the world of a great genius of modern jazz

Over the next three years he recorded prolifically and adventurously. On *Africa/Brass* (1961) he explored African forms and on *Impressions* (1963) his musical curiosity turned towards Indian music. He even named his son after Ravi Shankar. In between there was a collaborative album with Duke Ellington and a sublime collection of ballads.

In 1965 there came another quantum leap with *A Love Supreme*, on which his spiritual beliefs led to a more abstract style which influenced rock musicians from The Byrds to Carlos Santana. He followed with *Ascension* (1966), consisting of one long 40-minute piece on which he shared the sax solos with Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders and which ventured even further into free jazz and the avant-garde.

His final authorised album, *Expression*, was recorded in 1967 before his death from cancer that summer. Featuring second wife Alice Coltrane on piano it suggested a refinement that pointed in new and fresh directions he was never able to explore.

Since his death, Coltrane's solos have been transcribed and analysed by jazz scholars and written about at length by musicologists so that, as the critic Stuart Nicholson noted: "it might appear that you need a doctorate of music to go anywhere near his recordings".

Nothing could be further from the truth. Just put on *Giant Steps*, *My Favourite Things* or *A Love Supreme* and prepare to be transported by the sheer joy, exuberance, humanity and power of his playing ●

Picture credit: Jim Marshall Photography

1966

ASCENSION

Another watershed album, which found Coltrane moving away from the quartet format and towards a more avant-garde free jazz style, accompanied by the likes of fellow sax players Pharoah Sanders and Archie Shepp.

1966

MEDITATIONS

The spiritual follow up to *A Love Supreme* featuring both Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders as soloists and the last recording he made with long-time partners drummer Elvin Jones and pianist McCoy Tyner.

1966

LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD AGAIN!

Coltrane plays extended versions of early career favourites *Naima* and *My Favourite Things* accompanied by a sextet that includes Pharoah Sanders on tenor and flute and Alice Coltrane on piano.

1967

KULU SÉ MAMA

The last album released in his lifetime featuring tracks from three different 1965 sessions with Coltrane in cosmic jazz mode, fusing spirituality and groove and featuring chanting and exotic percussion by Juno Lewis.

1967

EXPRESSION

Recorded four months before Coltrane's death with a quintet featuring Sanders on flute and Alice Coltrane on piano, there's a refinement that pointed in new directions that leaves you wondering what he might have gone on to achieve.

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Russ Andrews
Evolution-300 PowerKord

BUILDING ON THE success of the Evolution-100 PowerKord (*HFC* 461), the 300 employs twice as many woven conductors. As with all the cables in the range, it uses Kimber Kable's high-purity copper and a new earthing arrangement claimed to offer 20 times less induced earth noise compared with its predecessor.

The Evolution-300 has 16 separately insulated Kimber Kable conductors woven together in a Kimber Weave to reduce pick up of RFI. Instead of the traditional approach of twisting the live and neutral conductors around a central earth conductor, the Evolution-300 has the earth conductor helically wound around the outside of the weave. The cable is sheathed in a soft and flexible sleeve combining two strand thicknesses for protection and noise reduction. The standard cable is terminated at one end with a high-performance UK mains plug, and at the other with a Wattgate W320e EVO 10A IEC. The 10A IEC 'kettle' plug can be replaced with a W320i high-current 20A IEC connector if required. Euro, US and international plugs are also available.

Some like it hot

I connect the Evolution-300 to my valve preamp power supply and play *Too Darn Hot* sung by Clare Teal with the Syd Lawrence Orchestra. Right from the opening blasts of the saxophones, which progress into the main vocal section, the pace and timing is spot on. The excitement of Teal's vocals is brilliantly conveyed as her performance sparkles with energy.

CPE Bach's *Symphony No.2* played by George Malcolm on the harpsichord with Neville Marriner conducting the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields is powerful and bright. Malcolm's playing is effortlessly light and clear and is beautifully complemented by the orchestral accompaniment, which really adds authority to the overall performance. I get a real sense of refinement with this recording – a quality that is somehow being drawn out by the Russ Andrews Evolution-300 cable. This new add-on certainly seems to elevate the performance of my system. ***NR***

DETAILS
PRICE
£366 for 1m
TELEPHONE
01539 797300
WEBSITE
russandrews.com

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

QED
Reference Audio 40 interconnect

AN UPGRADE TO QED's Performance Audio 40i RCA interconnect (*HFC* 481), the Reference Audio 40 is fitted with QED's Analoc2 RCA plugs. The plug bodies are manufactured entirely from non-conductive materials to minimise eddy currents. The Analoc2 design, like its predecessor, features low-bulk, high-purity copper connectors and low-mass metal barrels. It uses a high-rigidity thermoplastic material for the inner support structure and cable strain relief to eliminate the detrimental effects of eddy currents. Furthermore, the connector has hollow, gold-plated, high-purity copper signal pins to combat the skin effect, while the slip ring used for locking the similarly plated copper coaxial earth connection in place has also been improved.

The cables are made from two silver-plated 99.999 percent oxygen-free copper (SPOFC) conductors of different diameters that carry the same audio signal, to avoid any time smearing that might occur with a single audio pathway. A Zn/Mn Ferrite jacket is used within the cordage, designed to absorb very high-frequency noise components outside of the audible band that can adversely affect the micro-timing of the signal.

Lock and load

I connect the Reference Audio 40 between my preamp and monoblocks, and tighten the lock ring onto the sockets. An LP of Tchaikovsky's *Symphony No.4 In F Minor* played by the Cleveland Orchestra reveals forceful trumpet blasts during the opening that are clear and strident, without venturing into being harsh and edgy. The powerful bass drum is well extended, punchy and tight. The presentation of the full orchestra is handled beautifully.

With Laurent Garnier's *Desireless*, the pounding bass is very well controlled and the hi-hats clear with excellent timing and precision. In short, the Reference Audio 40 is a really classy interconnect that puts out a refined performance. ***NR***

DETAILS
PRICE
£120 for 1m
TELEPHONE
01279 501111
WEBSITE
qed.co.uk

OUR VERDICT
★★★★★

Rothwell

Phonostage & step-up transformer specialists for over 30 years

The first phonostage from Rothwell was unveiled back in 1990. In those days even the concept of an outboard phonostage was unknown to most audiophiles, though of course it's commonplace now. There were very few, if any, on the market then, and the first Rothwell phonostage was well ahead of its time. It was a valve design with a separate and substantial power supply, and it had adjustable load resistance and capacitance – ideas which were adopted only years later by others. 30 years on, Rothwell phonostages are still different from the many me-too offerings. All the designs, from entry-level to the top-of-the-range, are totally discrete transistor circuits without any op-amps at all, and they're all still made in the UK.
The Signature One even features onboard step-up transformers, which is pretty rare amongst even the most expensive phonostages in the world.

And step-up transformers for low output moving coil cartridges have been a speciality for over 30 years too. When the world seemed to have turned its back on the transformer, we kept the faith. Now many vinyl afficionados believe that a good step-up transformer is the only way to get the best performance from a LOMC cartridge. If you don't agree, we even make a moving coil headamp (aka a pre-preamp) which can be battery or mains powered. You won't find many of those anywhere else in the world. We even offer step-up transformer for high output moving coil cartridges. You won't find many of those anywhere else either.

www.rothwellaudioproducts.co.uk

Thanks to Doug Brady Hi-fi for their continuing support and for the use of their dem room featured in the picture.

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CD PLAYERS

Audiolab 6000CDT

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

The 6000CDT is exceptional at revealing what's on your discs to deliver a great big soundstage with plenty of detail inside. It can dig down deep into the mix to eke out the different musical strands while dynamically and rhythmically it's hard to beat at the price. In short, it's a super, highly affordable audiophile CD transport.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio AXC35

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Something of a budget marvel, you'll have to work extra hard to get the AXC35 to put a foot wrong. Bass is firm, detailed and blessed with excellent timing; the tonal palette is pleasingly broad and clean; and though the soundstage doesn't extend much beyond the speakers, there's great depth perspective.

★★★★★

Exposure XM CD

PRICE: £1,200 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

A highly likeable half-width compact disc player that presents music in an enjoyable yet technically accurate manner, the XM CD might lack the operational slickness and versatility of some rivals, but it more than makes up for it with its energetic, lively sound, dynamic light and shade and charming character.

★★★★½

Métronome Technologie Le Player 2S

PRICE: £5,100 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

As good as the sweet treble and rich bass are, what really impresses here is how when fed weaker CDs and impoverished MP3s the delivery remains unflappable and composed as layers of detail are locked into sharp focus.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity M3scd

PRICE: £1,150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Able to string together elements of the mix dextrously for a natural and believable sound, the M3scd's combination of detail and rhythmic alacrity are highly impressive while its excellent timing and tonal balance leave you wanting more. With its lovely, lyrical sonics oozing detail and subtlety, this is an extremely capable player.

★★★★★

Rotel CD11 Tribute

PRICE: £400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

A stunning team up between Marantz legend Ken Ishiwata before his sad passing and hi-fi luminary Karl-Heinz Fink, this is not one of those do-it-all players. Instead, its simple, refined sound and no-nonsense operation combine for a stunningly frill-free approach to superb playback at a great price.

★★★★★

ALSO CONSIDER

Audiolab
8300CDQ
£1,100 *HFC* 448
Taking the winning recipe of the 8200CDQ and adding an upgraded DAC with DSD playback, the accurate and uncoloured sound of the Audiolab is unmistakable. Vast amounts of detail are extracted from the mix, soundstaging is incredible and music flows naturally.

★★★★★

Leema Acoustics
Stream IV
£2,300 *HFC* 456
The latest update to this long-established player feels a considerable step forward. CD playback is highly refined, assured and transparent, bass is rock solid with visceral depth that positively grips your solar plexus and streaming shares all these qualities for the best of both worlds.

★★★★½

Marantz
SACD 30n
£2,700 *HFC* 468
While its styling might be a touch divisive, the SACD 30n's involving, detailed and highly refined sound is beyond dispute whether it be with SACD or CD. Meanwhile, its neat supreme streaming integration ensures a great performance without discs too.

★★★★★

Roksan
K3 CD Di
£1,300 *HFC* 403
Offering the relatively rare combination of smooth tonality with a lively and animated way of presenting the music, the K3 CD Di displays a sweet and even tonal balance with a panoramic soundstage. In short, it's closer to good analogue sound than digital.

★★★★★

AMPLIFIERS

Copland
CSA150

PRICE: £4,988 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

A tube/transistor hybrid that's more than the sum of its parts, the CSA150 is not just a fine all-rounder as it also excels sonically with a big, strong, engaging performance that's also surprisingly subtle and detailed for such a muscular thing. Well worth an audition, it's a bargain at the price considering all that it does.

★★★★★

Cyrus Audio
i7-XR

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Cyrus' engineers have been let off the leash budget-wise and the result is very impressive because while this is still unquestionably a Cyrus integrated amp – it looks like one, feels like one and has all the features we'd expect from the company – everything is ramped up and sounds better than ever before.

★★★★★

Exposure
3510

PRICE: From £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Delivering speaker control like a sergeant major on a power trip, you'd be forgiven for thinking the 3510 has been transported from the Eighties – all minimalist design and line-level inputs. Additional USB/DSD64 DAC and MC or MM phono boards are available and the performance comes across like a sizable blast from the past.

★★★★★

Quad
Vena II

PRICE: From £650 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 448

With a comprehensive spec that moves Quad's most compact integrated on and enough weight to bring any type of music so thrillingly to life, the Vena II does a fine job of giving bass natural weight, snap and dynamic ability while delivering a big room-filling sound that belies those tiny dimensions.

★★★★★

Rega
io

PRICE: £380 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

It might appear small and rather plain and it might not be over flowing with features or boast a huge amount of Watts, but give the io a talented source and you can't fail to be impressed by its outrageous musicality and lightness of foot. It's at one with the music with a supple fluency and rhythmical literacy.

★★★★★

Yamaha
A-S3200

PRICE: £5,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 464

This highly accomplished performer succeeds through its breadth of ability rather than exceeding in one specific area. A highly capable performer, its snappy sound and gutsy demeanour combine with speed, grip versatility and power to create a great-looking beast of an integrated.

★★★★★

PRE/POWER AMPLIFIERS

Cambridge Audio
Edge W
£2,500 *HFC* 447
The Edge W power amplifier quotes 2x 100W RMS output and has oodles of power to drive pretty much any speaker. It has a neutral sound with a hint of sweetness and an upbeat nature underwritten by plenty of insight that's seriously good for the money.

★★★★★

Longdog Audio
P6100M
£3,500 *HFC* 469
They may look and feel old-fashioned, but the P6100Ms are one of those rare but happy hi-fi surprises: seriously high-end sound for mid-price money. More transparent than they have any right to be, they have a fluid and mellifluous midband and pack one hell of a punch.

★★★★★

Exposure
XM7/XM9
£1,240/£1,390 *HFC* 429
Fast, open and three dimensional, the XM9 pairing is capable of driving more awkward speaker loads to high levels without any complaint. Partnered with the XM7 preamp/DAC, Exposure's house sound means a fulsome bass, midband detail and a smooth, yet spacious treble.

★★★★★

Rotel
Michi P5/S5
£3,300/£5,400 *HFC* 467
Rotel's high-end sub-brand might not be the last word in attack and slam, and some might bemoan its lack of detail. But that misses the point: when it comes to weight, scale and a breath-takingly natural approach to making music, few combos come even close to this one.

★★★★★

CABLES – INTERCONNECTS

Atlas Cables
Element Achromatic

PRICE: £86 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

Achromatic means without colour and that's very much what you get with this affordable offering. Compared with previous Atlas Element cables this has increased OCC copper content on the conductors and a new process for reduced distortion. The result is great spaciousness to the soundstage and imaging plus powerful bass.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Minuet

PRICE: £160 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Replacing the Prelude, this RCA interconnect is screened and employs silver-plated copper wire to improve clarity and high-frequency performance. The result is remarkably sophisticated for the money with detail, positioning of instruments, imaging and separation absolutely nailed on.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Clearway

PRICE: £100 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

A fantastic performer across a broad range of different music styles, the Clearway features the company's proprietary ARAY conductor geometry and ensures that all the detail of the individual instruments remains well defined, throughout playback – adding to the overall realism of the production.

★★★★★

Ecosse Cables
Master Reference SE

PRICE: £425 for 0.8m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Designed to convey an even greater degree of transparency, detail and three dimensionality than its rival interconnects, the Master Reference SE certainly doesn't disappoint. Punchy basslines, well-defined positioning, supreme soundstage width and clear focus are very much the order of the day here.

★★★★★

Kimber Kable
Select USB-Cu

PRICE: From £563 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Terminated with hand-made purpleheart and gaboon ebony connector housings, this distinctive USB cable achieves a soundstage that is both wide and deep. The edginess of violins is deeply impressive while instruments are perfectly located across the room revealing a stunning mix of definition and clarity.

★★★★½

QED
Performance Audio 40i

PRICE: £55 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 485

The stand-out winner of our interconnect *Group Test*, this black pearl-sheathed offering pairs a supreme sonic showing with impressive build quality and performances free from muddiness at a very generous price.

★★★★★

"A man who stops advertising to save money is like a man who stops a clock to save time."
- Henry Ford

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shedloadcreative.co.uk

CABLES – MAINS POWER

Atlas Cables
Eos dd

PRICE: £145 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

Referring to 'dual drain' technology, the Eos dd is designed to act as a filter against incoming contamination. The result is an inky blackness between musical phrases and a supremely low noise floor, while detail and imaging improve as interference is banished.

★★★★★

Black Rhodium
Stream

PRICE: £450 for 1.7m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 430

Black Rhodium has discovered that optimum sound quality is obtained from cables of 1.7m, hence this offering featuring silver-plated copper conductors. And who are we to argue, considering the impressive clarity and focus of instruments combined with a noise floor displaying an impressive lack of interference.

★★★★½

Chord Company
Shawline

PRICE: £200 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 438

Available at a variety of lengths, the Shawline mains cable is made from three lots of 14 AWG multi-strand conductors. Test highlights include superior front-to-back imaging, with all the tonal complexities of the instruments really coming to life, delivering genuine energy to orchestral performances.

★★★★★

Furutech
Roxy

PRICE: £233 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Connecting the Roxy to a source component immediately removes a layer of glare and 'glint' from the sound; tonally it's darkly translucent instead of shiny white gloss, allowing the listener to hear more into the music and appreciate the space between the notes.

★★★★★

IsoTek
Evo3 Initium

PRICE: £65 for 1.5m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 413

IsoTek's entry-level power cable has a distinctive opalescent green finish that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noiceable step up in the quality of musical instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

Russ Andrews
30th Anniversary YellO

PRICE: £65 for 1m **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 423

First introduced in the nineties, the YellO benefits from years of research into the effects of mains quality. Employing pure copper conductors, this relaunched cable results in a wider, deeper soundstage and the improvement it brings to instrument focus has to be heard to be believed.

★★★★★

DragonFly Cobalt

DAC + Preamp + Headphone Amp

The award-winning DragonFly Cobalt has the robust 2.1-volt output to drive almost any headphone, uses a bit-perfect digital volume control for outstanding signal-to-noise ratio, enables seamless compatibility with Apple and Android devices, and is an exceptionally competent and affordable MQA Renderer.

Cobalt's precedent-setting performance is made possible by:

- New ESS ES9038Q2M DAC chip with a minimum-phase slow roll-off filter for more natural sound.
- New Microchip PIC32MX274 microprocessor reduces current draw and increases processing speed by 33%.
- Improved power-supply filtering, specifically designed to reduce WiFi, Bluetooth, and cellular noise.
- Includes a form-fitting Carbon-level DragonTail USB-A to USB-C adaptor.

From MP3 to MQA and Hi-Res, DragonFly Cobalt preserves the body, warmth, and natural color in all your music. Experience more beauty at home and everywhere you listen.

audioquest

NETWORK AUDIO PLAYERS

Auralic
Altair G2.1

PRICE: £4,600 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Not just a network-attached DAC/preamp, with the addition of onboard storage the Altair G2.1 morphs into a self-contained music hub that reveals itself to be a deliciously neutral and clean source. It presents high levels of detail without sounding mechanical or artificial and musical involvement is top notch across all genres.

★★★★★

Cambridge Audio
Edge NQ

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 447

Something of a departure from CA's usual fare, this network music player also combines the additional versatility of a DAC and preamp to serve up a sumptuously wide recorded acoustic, with a hugely expansive sound that partners massive punch with great precision for a clean, direct and enjoyable sound.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Element X

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

Supporting everything from network streaming to 768kHz PCM, DSD1024, MQA and Roon, the Element X can also comfortably drive a variety of headphones. Tardis like it hides a multitude of features in its svelte shell and operationally it proves pretty much impossible to throw off course. Be warned, it goes seriously loud.

★★★★★

NAD
M33

PRICE: £4,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 466

Hot on the heels of 2019's M10, the M33 has raised the bar even further. In its full-size guise it offers the same style, flexibility and ease of use combined with a performance that's just as arresting with analogue sources as it is when streaming. Throw in futureproof MDC updating slots, and you're on to a winner.

★★★★★

Naim
ND5 XS 2

PRICE: £2,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 454

Delivering Naim's distinctive flare and typically impressive sound – superb low-end drive with texture and presence combined with a delicious sweetness – this Roon-compatible network music player is supremely engineered, over flowing with useful features and capable of a sparkling performance.

★★★★½

Yamaha
WXAD-10

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 442

One of the smallest options around, this MusicCast network audio player might not look like much, but don't be fooled – it has it where it counts. Tonal balance is neutral; bass is well integrated with good detail; and the space and three dimensionality add to the realism, making it great value for money.

★★★★½

MUSIC SERVERS

Bluesound
Vault 2i
£1,100 ***HFC* 452**
If you see yourself buying into the BluOS ecosystem favoured by the Canadian brand and its cohorts, this 2TB, server, ripper and player compatible with up to 24-bit/192kHz PCM and MQA files, is a great way of starting off in one room and expanding as your system grows.

★★★★½

Innuos
Zenith Mk3
From £3,000 ***HFC* 451**
With one of the best interfaces going and a potently flexible spec, the 4TB, CD ripping Zenith can be used as a Roon Core and delivers an outstanding performance that inspires confidence even for those starting out. It should be right near the top of any shortlist.

★★★★½

Melco
N100 EX
£2,000 ***HFC* 462**
Following a software update back in December 2019, the N100 became the EX so it's now powered by the excellent Intelligent Music Library system – the best in the business. The sharp lines of the chassis combined with the crisp, clean sound help seal the deal.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Core
£1,900 ***HFC* 438**
Equipped with a CD ripper and 1TB SSD, the Uniti Core takes on an understated role as it handles 32-bit/384kHz PCM and DSD128 music files impeccably. Presentation is pleasingly neutral and it simply lets whatever network audio player is attached get on with the music.

★★★★★

DACS

Alpha Design Labs
Stratos

PRICE: £1,315 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

Remarkably flexible at the price, the Stratos offers an impressively wide-reaching range of features without compromising sound quality. The soundstage is wide and open with a refined presentation, delicate details are reproduced with breath-taking accuracy and instrument separation and location are absolutely spot on.

★★★★★

Audiolab
M-DAC+

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 449

While some DACs can dive deeper into a recording, what's so likeable about the M-DAC+ is its poise, control and command of the bigger musical picture. With its stunning grasp of flow and tempo, there's a welcome warmth to its presentation and its solid three dimensional imaging is second to none.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
TT2

PRICE: £3,400 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

We could talk about dynamic range and noise floor modulation, but the TT2 simply creates a more believable illusion of a physical presence and space than its rivals. Combining superb build, typical design flair and stunning sound quality, this is a DAC that not only believes in the superiority of digital, but goes on to prove it too.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
Zen DAC V2

PRICE: £160 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 480

Supporting PCM files up to 384kHz and up to DSD256, this converter – that doubles as a headphone amp – is an absurdly talented option for the money. Connected to a digital source capable of delivering a lossless signal or better, it is consistently capable of an outstanding audio performance.

★★★★★

Matrix Audio
Mini-i Pro 3

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 482

Claiming the spoils in *HFC* 482's DAC *Group Test*, the Mini-i Pro 3 offers a winning combination of comprehensive spec and features, a stunning casework and – regardless of which way you elect to employ its services – it sounds absolutely superb. In short, it's the most accomplished digital front end for under a grand.

★★★★★

PS Audio
DirectStream

PRICE: £4,860 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

By converting everything it's fed to DSD, the DirectStream reveals more from CDs than its rivals for a superlative analogue-like sound that has more in common with master tape than anything digital can usually muster. Low-level resolution, refinement and a majestic sense of composure add to the positives.

★★★★★

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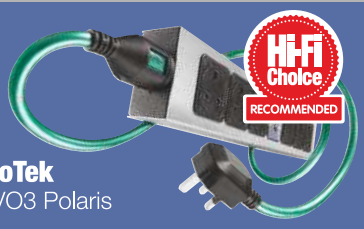

IsoTek
EVO3 Polaris

A six outlet distributor that removes Common and Differential mode mains noise. Delivers a marked benefit for dynamic range, a consequence of lowering the noise floor, as well as a general opening up of the soundstage.

★★★★★

IsoTek
EVO3 Initium

An entry-level power cable that is flexible and stylish. Once employed, there's a noticeable step up in the quality of instrument focus while clarity improves as the background becomes quieter and bass more extended.

★★★★★

FLOORSTANDING LOUDSPEAKERS

ATC SCM40

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

One of the company's more compact designs, this 40-litre three-way floorstander is a sealed box cabinet with lower sensitivity than most (necessitating a pretty muscular amp to hear it at its best). However, this is a solid, robust, powerful and gutsy-sounding speaker with plenty of insight and expansive soundstaging. Subtle and delicate enough for softer moments, it's equally comfortable going loud – displaying dramatically rendered crescendos and a fine sense of space.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins 702 Signature

PRICE: £5,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

Sporting B&W's tweeter-on-top, this stunning three-way comes with a glorious Datuk Gloss ebony-coloured veneer. It has a big controlled sound that fills large rooms with ease, ensuring rousing renditions of music overflowing with copious air and space and impressive soundstaging. Deft handling and plenty of punch complete the package.

★★★★½

DALI Spektor 6

PRICE: £500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 473

This *Group Test* winner positions itself at an extremely competitive price point and while it looks like a £500 loudspeaker, it sounds like it costs way more. It has a lovely natural tone, plus lots of detail and great dynamics. It sounds big, confident and expansive and yet is never overbearing or in anyway in your face. Throw into the mix a devastating combination of finesse and musicality and it's insatiable appetite for rhythm, and it's a no-brainer at the price.

★★★★★

Kerr Acoustic K320 mk.3

PRICE: £7,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 480

This *Group Test* winning floorstander comprehensively trounced everything else in almost every way in its roundup. It boasts a tonality that's a touch on the warm side of dry alongside a soundstage of architectural precision. In other respects it has extended yet propulsive bass, a joyously open midband and a deliciously lustrous treble. Plus it makes music great fun.

★★★★★

Monitor Audio Gold 300

PRICE: £4,000
REVIEWED: *HFC* 453

The benefits the Gold 300 brings to openness, clarity, fine detail and harmonic structure is very special. Although with vividly produced material it can verge on the 'hyper real', this is a consummate crowd pleaser that more than any rival at the price sells an idea of high-end luxury and sonic excellence that's hard to distinguish from the real thing.

★★★★★

Spendor D7.2

PRICE: £4,500
REVIEWED: *HFC* 456

A crisp, open and even-sounding loudspeaker that's impressively engaging and surprisingly dynamic – especially for a floorstander at this price. There's more space around vocals and a lighter more spry sound to cymbals, making for a lifelike sound despite its ability to remain smooth and sophisticated. The D7.2 is a modestly sized, highly capable, do-it-all loudspeaker that's well worth an audition.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER CABLES

Chord Company
Epic XL
£600 1.5m, terminated *HFC* 450
Combining elements of Chord's Signature Reference/XL with its Epic speaker cable, the XL bristles with energy and brings fantastic detail to the fore. Subtle elements are captivatingly clear, soundstage depth is enormous and clarity is supremely enhanced.

★★★★★

Chord Company
Odyssey X
£150 1m, terminated *HFC* 451
Made from the same materials as the Rumour X (*HFC* 447), the Odyssey X is designed to bring more control to dynamics and definition, and boy does it deliver. Front-to-back imaging is superb, instruments are well focused and clearly positioned while piano is full and rich.

★★★★★

QED
XT25
£85 3m *HFC* 434
Claimed to achieve a lowering of impedance compared with a traditional large cross-sectional area twin-core cable, the XT25 offers up great refinement and engaging musicality. Vocals are clear and full bodied, silence between phrases is eerily quiet and the noise floor is very low.

★★★★★

True Colours Industries
Storm
£22 1m *HFC* 453
This flexible ribbon cable is 2mm thick, making it ideal for hiding away under the carpet for tidy bi-wire hook-ups, while its tight and well-controlled performance reveals impressive openness with a spacious sound that's full and entirely uncluttered, even during crescendos.

★★★★★

STANDMOUNT LOUDSPEAKERS

Bowers & Wilkins
607 S2 Anniversary

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 470

More than just a range refresh, this baby box has had new life breathed into it in a rather skilful and expert way. So much more than the sum of its parts, the 607 S2 Anniversary Edition is highly engaging across all types of music, has a super classy treble and is the best B&W entry-level standmount yet.

★★★★★

Falcon Acoustics
RAM Studio 20

PRICE: From £2,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

The RAM Studio 20 clearly favours amps with plenty of grip, especially in the bass. It might not offer forensic levels of detail with which to dissect a recording, but as a wide-bandwidth, high-performance standmount that sounds easy, natural and is dripping with musical finesse, it takes some beating.

★★★★★

Fyne Audio
F1-8

PRICE: £6,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 473

If the F1-8 is anything to go by, size really does matter. If you're short of space, look elsewhere as this is a beast that won't melt into the background. But as a speaker that merges the strengths of the best standmounts and floorstanders, it is dynamic, dextrous and deeply satisfying with all types of music.

★★★★★

Q Acoustics
Concept 30

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

The Concept 30 is magnificently free of issues, places no great demand on partnering equipment and is unfussy about positioning. Combined with great looks, it is one of the very best standmounts available at the £1,000 pricepoint. Regardless of what you play on it, it's very hard to unsettle. Superb.

★★★★★

Sonus faber
Lumina I

PRICE: £800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

A worthy entry point into the Sonus faber family and a genuine star in its own right, the Lumina I manages to sound bigger, more self-assured and room filling than you'd expect from looking at it. It does all this while still delivering on the virtues expected from the company and looking and feeling very pleasant at the same time.

★★★★★

Spendor
Classic 3/1

PRICE: £2,730 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

The Spendor Classic may not be as modern looking as some rivals at the price, but don't be fooled: that traditional design hides a superbly talented standmount able to produce a sensational blend of accuracy, scale, refinement and sheer unadulterated fun, and it's not too fussy about placement.

★★★★★

LOUDSPEAKER SUPPORTS

Atacama Audio
Apollo Cyclone 6
£100 ***HFC*** **455**
Available in a choice of three sizes so you can get the height of your cabinets correctly positioned to suit your listening position, this stand removes unwanted vibrations from the performance sharpening imaging and instrument focus for a full, refined sound.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Racks
X50
From £180.48 ***HFC*** **453**
Solidly built, these elegant yet classy speaker stands are available in a choice of flexible customisation options, removing all colouration from the performance and giving the impression the cabinet is floating in mid-air. Great value for money and a simple upgrade.

★★★★★

IsoAcoustics
GAIA II
£300 ***HFC*** **427**
Attaching the GAIA II feet to the underside of your speaker provides a high degree of isolation that gives it the opportunity to breath and display a level of clarity and openness that's easy to hear. Music just sounds right with them in place and the price is right too.

★★★★★

Townshend Audio
Seismic Isolation Podium
From £1,400 ***HFC*** **426**
Placing your loudspeaker on to a Seismic Isolation Podium is a revelation. The way it completely removes its interaction with its surroundings is mind blowing, bringing clarity to the entire frequency range, enabling it to communicate far more effectively.

★★★★★

WIRELESS LOUDSPEAKERS

Bluesound
Pulse Flex 2i

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

With no shortage of lower frequencies, the Pulse Flex 2i's bass extension is controlled, pleasantly quick and has an impressive level of clout to it. Used as a pair, the soundstage is large and effortless underpinned by the aforementioned bass while the connections and range of features provide impressive flexibility.

★★★★½

Devialet
Phantom Reactor 900

PRICE: £2,580 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

Unlike any other wireless designs, the distinctive Phantom boasts 900W of peak power via its hybrid Class A/D amp and bass that dives down to a barely believable 18Hz. The result is power and extension that defies physics, but more impressive still is how it performs at low volume levels.

★★★★½

KEF
LS50 Wireless II

PRICE: £2,250 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 479

Combining an extensive and highly practical specification that makes it an ideal one-stop shop with a level of overall performance that is truly outstanding, the LS50 Wireless II might not be cheap, but it is unquestionably a quite superb all-in-one solution that images better than most rivals and is sonically fabulous.

★★★★½

KEF
LSX

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 446

It might not offer the muscle and dynamic reach of the LS50 Wireless, but the LSX is cut from the same sonic cloth. Size, style, flexibility and sound quality all impress, but it's the active ingredient which enables a performance that similarly priced passive systems will find hard to match that wins the day.

★★★★★

Naim
Mu-so 2nd Generation

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 452

A world away from the traditional components Naim is known for, the Mu-so 2nd Generation delivers unfailingly entertaining sonics with hi-fi values and an exceptional musicality.
The best one-box speaker system full stop.

★★★★★

System Audio
Legend 5.2 Silverback

PRICE: £2,800 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

A new paradigm that shatters the notion that you need a strapping floorstander for deep, powerful bass, the Legend 5.2 Silverback musters a performance that is as coherent, palpable, tonally true and rhythmically compelling as the very best available rival at many multiples of its price.

★★★★★

ONE-BOX SYSTEMS

Cambridge Audio
Evo 150
£2,250 *HFC* 477
In terms of functionality, the Evo 150 offers little over a dedicated streaming amp such as Hegel's H95. As an object of desire, however, it's on a different plane – as lovely to look at as it is to use and to listen to. There will be many takers for it.

★★★★★

NAD
M10
£2,200 *HFC* 451
With its super flexibility, powerful amplifier design, big front panel touchscreen and impressive BluOS platform, this is a supremely stylish offering. Sonically it's a very powerful and refined system while its definition and precision is in ample supply.

★★★★★

Naim
Uniti Star
£3,500 *HFC* 433
Fast, powerful and grippy with oodles of emotion and a pleasingly expressive tonality, the Uniti Star might not have the forensic detail resolution of some similarly priced rivals, but it isn't far off. Otherwise it's practically impossible to find fault at the price.

★★★★★

Novafidelity
X14
£690 *HFC* 446
Deserving of praise for the functionality it manages to squeeze into such a compact and elegant chassis, the X14's well thought out and practical approach will attract those looking to take their first steps into network audio and it makes a greater second-room setup.

★★★★½

TURNTABLES

AnalogueWorks
TT Zero

PRICE: £1,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

Pristine without being bright, the TT Zero has fine tonal discrimination and starts and stops precisely where it should. It is able to unpick all the audio strands with ease, sounding, open and airy with plenty of sparkle and bite, a low noise floor, lucid rhythmic gait and impressively clean, controlled and tuneful bass.

★★★★★

AVID
Volvere SP

PRICE: From £5,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 472

With its dynamic, detailed and confident presentation, the Volvere SP delivers all of the thrills hidden in your vinyl's grooves and adds a few more just for good measure. Rock solid, unerringly precise and gloriously natural, it's a triumph that combines the joys of a belt drive with the accuracy of a direct drive.

★★★★★

Linn
Majik LP12/Krane

PRICE: £3,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

For such an old design, this *Group Test* winner sounds surprisingly modern. It's not as soft and rounded as it used to be, but still retains enough of the traditional Sondek character for it to charm listeners. The result is a big, confident and enjoyable sound that's tonally a little warm but with high levels of technical virtuosity.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Debut Carbon EVO

PRICE: £450 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 468

Easy to setup and unfussy in use, the Debut Carbon EVO's extremely well-balanced sonic performance is comfortably the equal of any price rival, while the spaciousness of its soundstage and the unblemished nature of its performance make this one of the best sub-£500 turntable offerings period.

★★★★★

Rega
Planar 10

PRICE: £4,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 456

A masterpiece that is without doubt one of Rega's finest achievements, the Planar 10 manages to deliver a performance that is outstanding even at this lofty price point. Utterly unflappable, it offers incredible detail retrieval combined with a naturally low noise floor to dish up captivating vinyl execution.

★★★★★

Technics
SL-1500C

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 453

The built-in phono stage is terrific, while the take-no-prisoners sonic personality sounds joyously lively, enthusiastic and 'on it'. Thanks to its legendary torque and stability, it locks down timing and rhythm with start-stop precision and its firm, deep and expressive bass adds unrivalled impetus and authority.

★★★★★

CARTRIDGES

Audio-Technica
AT-OC9XEN
£300 ***HFC*** **452**
This *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cart utilises an elliptical nude stylus mated to an assembly using two coils rather than one – which is something of an A-T trademark – and balances excellent performance with a useful boost to user friendliness, thanks to its threaded body.

★★★★★

Hana
Umami Red
£3,400 ***HFC*** **483**
Translating from Japanese as 'brilliant" and 'gorgeous', this *Group Test*-winning low-output moving-coil cart more than lives up to its name. It sounds beautiful with a superb combination of power, poise, musicality, detail and insight, and makes music sound utterly magical.

★★★★★

Michell
Cusis S
£1,275 ***HFC*** **479**
With a wonderfully refined but potent performance, this *Group Test*-winning moving-coil cartridge has user-friendly dimensions and stunning bass. The result is that it is deftly able to deliver a superb performance with a variety of different musical styles and setups.

★★★★★

MoFi
UltraGold
£1,500 ***HFC*** **485**
This good-looking medium-output moving-coil cartridge from the US record label retains the warmth and air we've come to expect of MC offerings, but partners it with the sort of impressive trackability you'll struggle to match at the price. A real smooth operator.

★★★★★

PHONO STAGES

Chord Electronics
Huei

PRICE: £900 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 459

The Huei's appeal extends from its rock-solid build and playful, sphere-based control system to its impressive knack of extracting the best from a turntable/cartridge combo without being too painfully honest about the ropier aspects of less-than-pristine recordings.

★★★★★

Hegel
V10

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 474

It might be fiddly to setup and ensuring you pick the best combination of DIP switches for your cartridge isn't the most of intuitive of processes, but the V10 is effortlessly smooth, gloriously insightful and impeccably voiced for a crystal-clear performance with a wide range of different MM or MC pick-ups.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
Zen Phono

PRICE: £150 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 476

An astonishing performance and superb flexibility. Until you find yourself at the price where features like adjustable loading and capacitance are possible, the spec for the asking price is outstanding. This is one of a tiny number of designs anywhere near this price that can do justice to pretty much any cartridge under £500.

★★★★★

Musical Fidelity
M6x Vinyl

PRICE: £1,700 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 475

This multi-talented design offers a superb combination of excellent connectivity, versatile loading and gain options, a great user interface and excellent sound. Tonally it's very neutral with a crisp clean and spacious tone that's less euphonic than some may like, but nonetheless fun to listen to.

★★★★★

Pro-Ject
Phono Box RS2

PRICE: £1,300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

The RS2's transparency is genuinely impressive, even judged at the price and its lack of colouration is potentially very useful indeed. This is the product you buy when you're already satisfied with the tonal balance of your system and simply need a well-specified phono stage to complete it.

★★★★★

Tom Evans
MicroGroove+ X mkII

PRICE: £1,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 469

The closest thing the UK has to a phono stage guru, Evans designed the circuit for this stunning stage in 1989. Unapologetically plain, light and unassuming, the MicroGroove cuts the sonic mustard like nothing else to make even mid-priced turntables sound far higher end than they actually are. Superb.

★★★★★

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

Audeze
LCDi3
£900 *HFC* 478
Clarity, subtlety and coherence meet scale, air and an utterly compelling sense of dynamic freedom on this stunning *Group Test*-winning planar magnetic in-ear. With great poise and even handedness, it never gives the impression of trying too hard.

★★★★★

Oriveti
OH500
£500 *HFC* 451
Combining an airiness with low-end extension that most rivals can only dream of, the OH500's stylish resin enclosures house four Knowles balanced armatures (two for bass and two for the midrange) with an 8mm dynamic bass driver for an enjoyably vivid performance.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
IE 900
£1,100 *HFC* 478
If dynamic dexterity and resolution that would shame a spy satellite are what you crave, the IE 900 scours the noise floor like few other in-ear offerings at the price. Articulation, separation and drive are equally impressive while treble extension and refinement are superb.

★★★★★

Bowers & Wilkins
PI7
£349 *HFC* 478
The first pair of True wireless in-ears from B&W does a supreme job of capturing fine details and stitching them into a wider whole. Bass extension is deep without being at the expense of speed and noise cancelling works without effecting the tonal balance.

★★★★★

HEADPHONES

Audio-Technica
ATH-M50xBT

PRICE: £180 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 450

Taking its M50x and turning it into a very capable wireless design (thanks to Bluetooth v5.0) without altering its sonic character, Audio-Technica has come up trumps here. Balance and refinement join crunching bass, impressive three dimensionality and decent noise-cancelling to seal the deal.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

Bowers & Wilkins
PX7

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

Although it's no match for a high-end wired design, the noise-cancelling abilities of this wireless closed-back model are ideal for music on the move – offering an elevated listening experience amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. An essential audition if you're serious about enjoying your music out and about.

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY

Philips
Fidelio L3

PRICE: £300 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 486

This wireless noise-cancelling headphone *Group Test* winner ticks pretty much every box at the price. Boasting aptX HD, a 38 hour battery life and decent noise cancelling, it is well built and comfortable. And while the accompanying app makes operation a doddle, the music just flows in an easy going, unforced way.

★★★★★

Rosson Audio Design
RAD-0

PRICE: £2,500 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 481

A largely viceless implementation of planar magnetic headphone that delivers the commendable virtues of the design with very few of the downsides. Comfortable and well made, the RAD-0 sounds absolutely superb.

★★★★★

Sennheiser
Momentum 3

PRICE: £350 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 455

With a Bluetooth performance that makes it hard to believe this is really a wireless offering, the Momentum might just be the most consistently entertaining performer Sennheiser has ever produced. Excellent design, fabulous features, subsonic bass and impeccable noise cancelling complete the package.

★★★★★

T+A
Solitaire P-SE

PRICE: £3,000 **REVIEWED:** *HFC* 477

Shaving as much as 40 percent off the price of its flagship P headphone, while retaining more than 60 percent of the capability, this is a stunning open-back, planar magnetic T+A offering. It might be expensive, but the sheer levels of performance and the quality of the build and design mean it is one of the best.

★★★★★

PORTABLE DACS

AudioQuest
DragonFly Cobalt
£270 *HFC* 463
With a relatively low 24-bit/96kHz sample rate, expectations for the Cobalt aren't high until realising it means there's no need for USB driver software. Native MQA decoding is also supported and the open and richly detailed sound make this the best DragonFly offering yet.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Hugo 2
£1,800 *HFC* 428
An essential audition, the Hugo 2 is not just a portable DAC/headphone amp, but the best hi-fi digital converter available at or near the price. Music ebbs and flows along in an organic and unforced way and it images with stunning pinpoint precision.

★★★★★

Chord Electronics
Mojo
£400 *HFC* 423
It might be small and have no gain setting adjustment, but the Mojo takes some beating. Its scrupulous accuracy presents what is contained in a recording with no embellishment so that fine detail is extracted with ease, treble energy impresses and stridency remains absent.

★★★★★

iFi Audio
xDSD
£400 *HFC* 439
Justifying its inclusion on sound alone, the xDSD delivers a wide variety of musical styles with admirable clarity and precision. It's engaging, lively sonics and versatile connectivity make it equally adept for mobile or desktop use and the only minor downside is its battery life.

★★★★★

Hi-Fi Choice Reader Classified

Welcome to *Hi-Fi Choice* Reader Classified, a free private ads service for buying and selling second-hand hi-fi components.

These pages are a must-read if you're thinking about buying used kit, or if you have hi-fi you want to sell. It's free – simply submit your ad with no more than **50 words** (we reserve the right to edit it if not), remembering to include your email, phone number and county. Simply email your ad to: **letters@hifichoice.co.uk**. This service is open to private advertisers only. Just **one** ad per household and please note that images are for illustration only and **do not** represent what is for sale.

FOR SALE

CYRUS DAC-X brushed black, excellent condition, boxed £450: **email: rachel_2290@hotmail.com (Berks).**

MICHELL Gyrodec SE turntable with Origin Live Encounter 3C arm. Michell Orbe platter kit. Sensible offers only please. Cash only, buyers collect. Near M25/A21. **Email: billytkippington@gmail.com**

ICON AUDIO MB845 Mk.1 monoblock amplifiers. Upgraded to SE version with new Mundorf capacitors. New 845 valves on one amp. Boxed. Great powerful sound. Sensible offers: **07717 752288 or email: captain_b99@yahoo.co.uk (Bristol).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A1 amp (2008 version), with USB, MM phono stage, 36W. Excellent condition, remote and manual. No box, so collection only, £425: **07398 642586 or email: Johnakeanelangley@gmail.com**

ART AUDIO Concerto MKII 50WPC valve power amp. Also, Music First transformer-based preamp. All in immaculate condition. £1,500 and £600, a great combo which I can split: **01981 242067 or email: treesurglee@aol.com (Monmouth).**

CAMBRIDGE AUDIO CXN V2 streamer, lunar grey, excellent condition and light use. Original box and remote: £500. Collection only: **01280 469852 or email: davidsangster53@gmail.com. (Buckingham).**

REGA Planar 8 turntable with Apheta 3 MC cartridge fitted. Only 9 months old. All original packaging included: £1,950. Collect only: **07910 387221 or email: philbailey46@gmail.com (Epsom, Surrey).**

DYNAUDIO Evoke 10 standmount speaker new last December. Offers invited: **01825 722936 or email: stewartandjoy@gmail.com (Sussex).**

AURALIC Altair wireless streaming DAC/preamp. Silver, VGC, box, brochure and remote £800. Macintosh Super Audio CD/DAC 550 cost £8,500 for sale £4,000. VGC, box, brochure and remote: **07725 818438 or email: jonniejpc@msn.com (London).**

NAIM Uniti Mk1 serviced by Naim in 2018 and upgraded to 24-bit/192kHz spec, unmarked condition with all supplied accessories and box, £700: **07788 975856 or email: tyl590@aol.com (Gloucestershire).**

FOCAL Utopia headphones £1,800 ono. Not a lot of use as I prefer to listen through loudspeakers: **01656 733354 or email: pauldavies242000@yahoo.co.uk.**

QUAD Artera Solus just back from Quad with full software upgrade. Mint condition, black, boxed £795: **0208 6949350 or email: alan-charlesworth@sky.com (London).**

NAKAMICHI CR2E cassette deck £150, Pioneer PL112D turntable £125, Russ Andrews Yello Powercord 30th Anniversary 1m in length, brand new £49. A5 *HiFi Choice* magazines from 1975 to 1987. 15 in total, £10 Each. Cash on collection only: **07708 431963 (Crewe).**

ICON AUDIO SMFV3 speakers. Unmarked. £850. Pro-Ject Xperience Classic turntable olive wood, new lid, GoldNote cart £795. Tisbury Audio Domino phono amp. Barely used £130. Denon DL103 cart, never used £255. All manuals boxed and excellent condition: **07771 807042 or email: vincehumphreys@hotmail.co.uk (Lancashire).**

LEAK Stereo 20 power/preamp, dark grey, £600: **07988 081094.**

QUAD II classic integrated valve amplifier. Gold finish, excellent condition with leads and instructions, can demo, £1,900: **07704 145987 (am only) or email: norbertstefan@yahoo.co.uk (Bedfordshire).**

AUDIO-TECHNICA ATH-70 electret condenser headphones. Vintage pair of headphones in good condition and with original packaging, £45: **email: petersharples20@gmail.com.**

LINN Sondek LP12 with Ittok LV11 tonearm and K9 cartridge: £1,500. Pair Linn Keilidh speakers: £200. Creek 5050 amplifier: £100. Mint condition: **07754 084481 or email: helen.a.marshall24@gmail.com (Guildford).**

SENNHEISER HD 800 headphones for sale. Mint condition for £600: **01656 733354.**

REGA P3 £195, Goldring Eroica moving-coil £99. Both little use/very good condition. Lyra Delos

BUYING TIPS **BUYING SECOND-HAND** can be a great way to pick up a bargain. A formerly expensive second-hand component might well prove a better long-term bet than a brand-new product if the price is right. **DO SOME RESEARCH** on which brands have a good service back up, so if something does go wrong, you can get it fixed. Unless you purchase from a dealer, you're unlikely to get any warranty, so it's up to you to ensure the fitness of any gear that you buy. **USUALLY** speakers should be less prone to breakdown than amps, and amps should be more reliable than CD players. But any abused component could be trouble – have a proper demo and judge the seller as well as the goods!

moving-coil cart, old but good/careful use £99. LSA1 standmounts, slight cosmetic damage to one, but sound great £175. Buyer to collect: **0790 5501265 or email: john.harris61@btinternet.com (East Sussex).**

MUSICAL FIDELITY A370 power amplifier, Class A, 185W, fully functional with exception of bulb in on/off switch. Cosmetically very good with no scratches or dents. One owner. £1,000 ono: **01789 842336 (South Warwickshire).**

THORENS TD 321 turntable with Linn Basik LV X and Nagaoka MP100. Little used for many years. Offers please to: **07463 572804 (Leics).**

QUAD ESL 988 speakers, black, immaculate condition, with original packaging, boxes, leads and owners manual. Full Quad service history – with all genuine Quad invoices. Recently tuned with the Nordost tuning disc. Can deliver, £1,250 ono: **01827 284023, mobile: 07855 579797.**

NORDOST Blue Heaven AC UK mains lead, 1.5m, as new boxed £120. SliC Eclipse C MK111 XLR interconnect 1m as new boxed £170. 2x Naim PowerLine Lite mains leads as new £20. iFI AC iPurifier UK version as new boxed £50 **email: stevecousins136@gmail.com (Dorset).**

REGA Planar 3 (black, Eighties) with RB300 and AT-OC5 £295 with cartridge, otherwise £245. Rare Sawafuji SFI-10 three-way pair, walnut £345. Audiolab 8000SX (black, Eighties) £195: **email: sn.banks@ntlworld.com (Hitchin).**

AUDIO RESEARCH LS28 preamplifier, mint condition with box and manual, buyer to collect £3,950: **07913 236601 (Manningtree, Essex).**

PROAC Tablette Reference 8 Signature black speakers, little used: £595. Musical Fidelity M6 Dac mint condition £550: **01704 628968 or 07968 769595.**

SBOOSTER BOTW MK11 audiophile power supply 15/16v. Excellent condition, with selection of interchangeable DC tips, manual and original box. Suitable for Chord TT2 or Upscaler £150: **07923047638 or email: dave.drew@talktalk.net (East Yorkshire).**

PIONEER PL112D turntable £125. Nakamichi CR2E cassette deck (upgraded) £150. Russ Andrews Yello Powercord 30th Anniversary 1m UK to IEC female, never used £49. 15 A5 Size *Hi-Fi Choice* magazines from 1975 to 1987 £10 each. Cash on collection: **07708 431963.**

AUDIOLAB 8000A amplifier in original packaging and delivery by DPD (for £20 extra) £240 ono: **01299 270810 or email: as.parker@btinternet.com (South Shropshire).**

NEAT Iota Alpha speakers in Ebony Macassar finish. Light use. As new condition in original boxes/inserts: £950 ono. Cyrus CDi CD player, hardly used, as new condition in original box/inserts £850 ono: **07951 738222 or email: Jbrogden1@gmail.com (Surrey).**

THORENS TD124 MkII turntable, chassis only: £750. Linn Basik IVX tonearm: £130: **07988 081094**.

MYRYAD MXT 2000 FM tuner for sale, excellent, mint condition, brushed silver, finish, super FM reception. £400 ono: **01483 472650 (Woking, Surrey).**

AUDIOLAB 8000 CD player, totally mint condition, remote control, power lead and instructions. Can demo. £175. Collection or your courier: **07852 61550 or email: derek.03.forshaw@gmail.com (Wigan, Lancs).**

WORLD DESIGNS KT88 XL power amp, Phono 3S phono stage, HD3S XL headphone amp, Pre4 XL valve preamp, PSU3 power supply. All in as-new condition and excellent working order. Very little use. £3,500: **01159 754070 or 07531 288156.**

NOTTINGHAM ANALOGUE Hyperspace turntable, 10in Ace Space arm and NA plinth. £2,500: **07505 583615 (Nottingham).**

EDWARDS AUDIO TT1 turntable in black with C100 cart. Purchased 2016, but rarely used, with all original packaging: £200 ono: **07854 178012 or email: cllrmsmith@hotmail.co.uk (Addlestone, Surrey).**

SONUS FABER Electa Amator speakers complete with original wood/stone stands. Exceptional condition £1,750: **07741 416584 (Lincs)**

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REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL

Exciting things coming your way in the month ahead

1 RSD UBERACTIVE

More action from Record Store Day 2022, – there's a compilation album coming out soon created with Vans entitled *Portraits Of Her* to benefit We Are Moving The Needle, an organisation that supports female recording professionals, including audio engineers and producers.

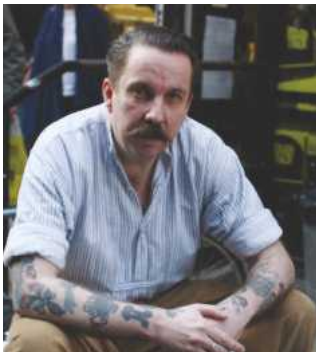
In addition to RSD ambassador Taylor Swift, the 16-track album will also feature Girl In Red, Julien Baker, Banks, Princess Nokia, Leyla Blue, Boyish, Bully, Alice Longyu Gao, Laura Jane Grace, Asiahn, Girl Ultra, K Flay, Mariah The Scientist, Julia Michaels and Joy Oladok.

Rare Bird is also publishing a new book in April entitled *Record Store Day: The Most Improbable Comeback Of The 21st Century* to mark the 15th celebration of the culture of the indie record store. It features interviews with RSD organisers, members of the record store community and supportive musicians. There are three editions: A thick matte paperback edition, a deluxe 12in hardback edition and a Think Indie x RSD + vinyl edition, limited to 1,100 copies. This special edition includes a compilation LP of in-store performances at record stores across the US, featuring Paul McCartney, Metallica, Pearl Jam, Billie Eilish, Imagine Dragons, Jason Isbell + the 400 Unit, Regina Spektor, Frightened Rabbit, Mudhoney and more. To pre-order a copy go to: roughtrade.com

2 RAVE ON!

In Pursuit of Repetitive Beats, an interactive VR experience based on the Acid House movement, is running in Coventry. The exhibition invites: "audiences to go in search of an illegal rave, one night in Coventry in 1989. From poster-strewn bedrooms to pirate radio stations, police headquarters to secret warehouses, you'll step into the shoes of rave culture pioneers as you go in search of the party." The press release calls it: "an immersive exhibition and explorable virtual world… combining Acid House tracks with interactivity and multi-sensory simulation, it brings to life the stories of the promoters, police officers and rave-goers, whose rivalries and relationships drove a revolution in music and society."

Directed by Darren Emerson and produced by East City Films and BPM XR LTD, In Pursuit Of Repetitive Beats premieres on 28 March as part of the Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 celebrations. The hour-long exhibition will be hosted at The Box in Fargo Village and will run until 1 May. Tickets are on sale for £6 at: coventry2021.co.uk



3 AHOY THERE!

A new short film telling the story behind the late remix genius Andrew Weatherall's mantra: "Fail We May, Sail We Must" has been released on Youtube.

The 11-minute documentary, directed by Trevor Whelan and Rua Meegan of Grizzly and produced by Dublin-based creative agency The Tenth Man, unveils the story of Weatherall's encounter with fisherman Gerard Sheehy in rural county Cork. As they exchange stories and tales of the sea, the seafarer shares some words of wisdom that end up changing Weatherall's path, inspiring the signature phrase that he had tattooed on his arms. You can find it here: youtube.com/watch?v=RXWKxP_6iiU.

4 LASER-GUIDED

Leema Acoustics has updated its free loudspeaker calibration guide, ahead of the launch of new products later in the year.

The latest version features a new speaker toe-in calibration method, using laser measurement. The free PDF download guide, which has been expanded to nine pages, now offers comprehensive advice on toe-in, complete with a number of easy-to-follow steps for the perfect set up.

Q ACOUSTICS' M20 HD NOW COMES IN NEW WHITE AND WALNUT FINISHES

The 'laser method', which uses nothing more than masking tape, a tape measure and a laser measure, "is designed to help music lovers find the optimum toe-in position for the speakers they already own".

You can download the PDF from: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gsR89s2XDA0oiu2rWWS3fij_OUur-_I4/view.

5 JOIN THE Q

Q Acoustics' M20 HD wireless music system is now available in two new finishes – an elegant matte white or vintage walnut veneer, joining the classic matte black model. Matching optional speaker stands complete the setup. The M20 HD costs £400. Find out more at: qacoustics.co.uk.

Picture credit: Spencer Hickman (Andrew Weatherall)

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Next Month

CHORD ELECTRONICS MOJO 2

Seven years after launching its first Mojo model, Chord Electronics delivers the Mojo 2: "A tech-dense miniature marvel simply without equal" according to our review. "For the ultimate portable headphone/DAC experience and especially standalone outboard DAC duties, the Mojo 2 comfortably holds sway." See how it fares...

ALSO:

REVIEWS Rogers' legendary LS3/5a SE two-way standmount loudspeaker, Roksan's stylish Attessa Turntable, Apple's AirPods Max wireless noise-cancelling headphones, Meze Audio's sumptuous Liric headphone and a *Group Test* of six wireless streaming speakers

FEATURES Music Legends, Music Reviews, Reasons To Be Cheerful, our comprehensive Buyer's Guide and sharp-as-nails Opinions pieces, and all your hi-fi questions answered by our experts, plus Chasing The Dragon explores the best way to record music

MAY ISSUE ON SALE 21 APRIL

ERCO* by **Ferrum**

desktop high end just became a thing

*oh, and it's pronounced **ertso**

To create the best possible headphone DAC we started by integrating some of our award-winning HYPSOS technology and some of OOR's magic. The final ingredient was the culmination of 20+ years' worth of experience in making DA converters to make ERCO perform out of its league. Together with your favorite headphones or powered speakers, ERCO will turn your desktop into a place of high end. For some ERCO is the end destination – for others, the start of a beautiful journey. No matter how you look at ERCO, it brings you the real thing. No coloration, low distortion, high dynamics. Your music will get the perfect canvas, with a background of absolute silence.

Ferrum **ERCO** Headphone DAC/AMP • truly balanced design • proprietary IC power amp design • > 6,1 W into 50 Ω (bal. mode) output power • headphone output impedance < 0,3 Ω • ESS Sabre 9028PRO DAC chip (32/384) • 120dB Digital Dynamic Range • ARM optimized MQA decoder and renderer • 3 proprietary programmed digital inputs and 1 analog input • balanced (4,4 mm) and unbalanced (6,35 mm) headphone and XLR/RCA line outputs • 1,8 kg • 21,7 x 20,6 x 5 cm

30-day Free Trial • Free Support • Free Extended 3-year Warranty

Check **www.ferrum.audio** for your local dealer

IT TOOK 400 YEARS TO CREATE THIS CARTRIDGE

Ever since the first Koetsu cartridges appeared in the West, nearly 40 years ago, they have served as emissaries for Japanese creativity. Each model, from the earliest Rosewood, has embodied uniquely Japanese skills and attitudes.

Urushi lacquer techniques were introduced to music lovers outside of Japan through Koetsu, when Urushi adorned the body of the eponymous moving-coil cartridge. Jade, rare woods, stone – Koetsu designers turn to nature, as do those who inspire them.

While analogue playback has been with us for only 100 years, the metiers des arts employed by Koetsu date back centuries. The brand's namesake, Hon'ami Koetsu (1558-1637), was an artisan whose work inspired the founding of the Rinpa school of painting. In the 1970s, Sugano-san demonstrated how these disciplines enhanced the pleasure of LP playback.

Another artist would say: if it looks right, it is right. Or perhaps that should be…if it looks right, it sounds right.

"...like having an open window onto the music"
- Jimmy Hughes - HiFi Choice

"...singing with a passion and vitality that both seduces and convinces all at once"
- Roy Gregory - HiFi Plus

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